





BY E. L. GRANT WATSON

WHERE BONDS ARE LOOSED

THE MAINLAND

DELIVERANCE

THE OTHER MAGIC

THE DESERT HORIZON

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THE DESERT HORIZON

BY E. L. GRANT WATSON
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PART I

Chapter I: *The New Land*

I

UPON the western border of the Great Australian Desert there is a fringe of territory where the rain-fall though meagre and uncertain is sufficient to support a sparse vegetation. Mulga and wattle bushes grow stunted in the hard soil. Eastward toward the desert, clumps of spinifex grass form irregular lines over the dusty, red surface, and here and there near the clay-pans where water has gathered after the spring rains, there will stand a solitary gum-tree or a group of parched-looking saplings, which have the appearance of having grown old without ever having reached maturity. And further east the trees become sparser until they cease; the dusty spaces between the bushes become broader, and the only plants which are able to flourish under the blaze of that arid heat are the spiked tufts of spinifex, which in unbroken procession, lead toward the heart of the desert. Westward of this borderland, and in many localities including large tracts of it, are cattle and sheep stations. Toward the coast the rainfall is more certain and more abundant, and although no grass grows upon the hard, red soil, the blue-leaved under-bush is rank and abundant. It is upon these bushes that the sheep and cattle feed, cropping the leaves close to the gnarled stems. Here also are plains where low-growing salt-bushes spread their

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thick, succulent foliage, mile beyond mile, into the shimmering mauve distance.

In this region of intense sunlight, so enticing and yet so inimical to the life of man, great fortunes have been made, and still remain for those men who, together with a sprinkling of good luck, have the power and will to grasp narrowly at their material gain and look no further. Over vast farms whose area is measured in square miles rather than in acres, thousands of sheep are pastured. The few men who succeed, succeed greatly; but for the success of one man it is necessary for many others to fail. Barclay was one of the failures. For three years he had been struggling in the painful, slow process of defeat. With the uttermost strength of his muscle and brain he had toiled. In the losing fight he had been hampered by wife and children. Not that his wife had not fought staunchly by his side. His children also helped as far as they were able. Martin, his eldest son, who was now eleven, and Mary who was nine had already helped to put their small strength into the balance; but where it is difficult for a man to live alone and succeed it is more difficult when he has wife and children. Barclay had suffered from bad seasons, he had sold first one part and then another part of his land. He had mortgaged the house and the last few acres.

The prospect of owning his own farm and of working as a free man appealed to all his repressed potentialities. In his own mind he imagined that through life he had been thwarted of his true development. He had been a good worker, had succeeded in a small way and had saved money. Six years ago, when he

first came out to the colony, he had worked as a stockman on a large southern estate and had earned good wages. Having learnt something of the ways of the country, the prospect of becoming his own master had become too tempting to be resisted. The land was very cheap, and eastward towards the desert was that large area of potentially valuable territory as yet unbroken by the industry of man, which could be taken up from the government, without payment, upon conditions which at the time seemed easy to fulfill.

The first two years were a terrific struggle towards the taming of that virgin soil. Wells had to be sunk and fences built. The fencing was harder work and took longer than Barclay anticipated. Often drovers from other parts of the country, rather than go a fullong or so out of their way to the nearest gate, would pull up the newly planted stakes, break down the wire and drive their cattle through the gap. Through these gaps Barclay's cattle would later find their way, would wander into the desert and be lost. The second and third years of his sojourn in the new land were years of drought. Only two inches of rain fell during the twenty-four months. This was considered exceptionally bad, the average rainfall being about fourteen inches. The windmill pumps failed to draw water from the shallower wells, and the water from the new wells that had been sunk was rank with salts which poisoned the cattle. To cover his losses, he was forced to sell much of the land upon which he had spent much labour, and which was just beginning to show signs of submission. And now after four years of the hardest work he had ever experienced, he was working for wages on soil which he had once owned,

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and which his own efforts had broken in. In the process of defeat, his temper and character had suffered. It is a bitter thing for any man to work to his uttermost and fail, more especially when that failure is drawn out over four years of frustrated hope. Barclay was neither cowed nor broken, but he was very bitter towards fate. He was filled with a burning, unreasonable desire for revenge. But upon what could he take revenge? Not upon the dust covered soil, not upon the sheep that had died for lack of water, nor upon the unrelenting ardour of the sunlight. He harboured a grudge against life itself. As his anger and resentment grew he caught the habit of muttering; his virile nature seemed to turn inwards in a fierce and private contemplation. At home, in the house, he spoke little, but was quick with an oath if his meals were not as he liked, or if the children made too much noise.

His wife, Clara, was in many ways a strong contrast. She was fair-haired and plump, her flesh of rather a soft texture and very white. She was an East Anglian, and had been born and bred in a Suffolk village. When she was a girl of twenty, twelve years ago, she had been on a visit to Ipswich for a few days, and there by chance had met Barclay. He had at once fallen in love, and, with characteristic impetuosity, had thrown up his job that he might stay and court her. At the time she had failed to understand either the man or the passion that she had inspired. Her blue, candid eyes had been rather shocked, but she had yielded, as perforce so gentle a creature must have yielded, to the hint of deep, fierce power which both attracted and repelled.

From the time of her marriage, she had followed with a helpless kind of abandon the twistings and turnings of his discontent. In the first years she had known some happiness, but she was always half-conscious that she was too easy-going, too soft-bodied a woman to have mated with a man so restless in mind and so hard in muscle.

Her first boy was born within a year, and was followed close by a second child. The young mother and her little family moved from place to place in the wake of her restless man, who, in spite of well-laid schemes for success, hard work and an ever-gnawing ambition, progressed but slowly along the road of advancement. Sometimes she thought that her husband had more than his share of bad luck, and she was vaguely aware of a half-articulate cynicism, closely knit into the very fibre of his body, which made him unpopular with other men. She felt, rather than consciously suspected, that somewhere deep in his nature, was a grudging suspicion of life, a feeling of power thwarted and misdirected, unable to find its expression. They were both inarticulate, but with this difference, that whereas Clara had nothing to say, there was in Barclay a deep sense of unspoken grievance against the world in general. It was as if somewhere in the dark recesses of his mind there lurked a limitless store of ill-fortune, and when, in its inevitable time, some portion of it materialized and lay across his path, he recognized it as an old and familiar enemy.

After six years of marriage they had sailed for Australia, hoping to find in a new free country a faster road to success than they had found in the petty and exacting routine of commercial business. A few

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months after their arrival, the third child, Patrick, had been born. For Mrs. O'Brien there now followed a comparatively happy and uneventful period. She and her children lived in furnished lodgings on the outskirts of Perth. Barclay was away working on a farm, and she was left in peace to enjoy the new aspects of nature, the radiant glory of the cloudless sky, the fresh, clear air and the mild and subtle charm of the Australian vegetation. During this time of respite she prepared herself against the new adventure.

At the end of two years, they moved northward to the Nallagoo station, and, with mingled hope and apprehension, she saw the accumulated savings of their married life, the hard won earnings wrung from an adverse fortune, laid out upon the initial expenses of the new farm.

The Nallagoo homestead, like the majority of its kind, was a straggling and roomy bungalow built of weather-boarding, match-boarding and corrugated iron. The kitchen and other out-houses were mere wooden frameworks covered with hessian and painted white. The house stood on the slight undulating rise of a broad schistose dyke, which, harder than the surrounding granite, raised its sloping sides some few feet higher. In every direction a vast plain, covered with scanty, blue-leaved bushes, stretched far away to faint mauve distances shimmering in the heat. There was no other human habitation in sight. At about a hundred yards from the front door there was a large, and, for this region of the desert-steppe, an exceptionally large clay-pan. Some half dozen gum-trees grew about its banks, and in ordinary seasons it con-

tained water. Close beside it there was a well with its accompanying wind-mill, a slight, awkward-looking structure upon four iron legs rising to about forty feet in height. In front of the house, the sloping ground was destitute of soil, the rough surface of the schist was exposed, and flakes of mica and biotite glittered blue and gold in the sunshine. But at a little distance, the raised ground upon which the house was built met the granite plain, where a red, powdery dust lay deep upon the surface. The landscape was stained by the all-pervading colour of the dust, whose particles were so fine as to be carried into every cranny and nook. In the sunlight, the house, the wind-mill and the gum-trees all took the same soft and elusive blending of mauve and pink; the sky alone was a deep, intense blue.

On her first journey across the seemingly limitless flats of the Australian bush, Clara O'Brien was filled with strangely mingled feelings. Together with a numb and inarticulate dread, there was a sense of relief, almost of satisfaction. That her husband should have chosen such a remote and desolate spot seemed in character with his growing misanthropy. But there were other thoughts which vaguely stirred within her brain. Here at last was a sense of finality. She felt with strange contentment, that, at all events for herself, this was the ultimate phase, and for this she was glad. She was alive to some influence in the atmosphere, persuasive and gentle, whispering of an everlasting peace, whose power would never abate but would grow stronger and stronger. During the first months of her sojourn at Nallagoo, this awakened sense of finality became an ever-present consciousness.

The silence and the shivering chill of early morn, the quick sunrise, the blazing light and the sudden heat as the sun rose high overhead, the short, irregular gusts of wind at mid-day, the crimson streams of light from the setting sun, the cool of evening and the clear splendour of the night, all these contributed to an illusive yet numbing charm, in the presence of whose power, her will became not so much tired as gratefully lulled into slumber. She did not in any way go out to meet or to discover alien qualities, it was rather that she sank deeper into herself, and became aware at last of what, for these many years, she had needed.

This peace, which seemed so deep, was to be broken before it could reach its final consummation. At the end of the second year, when Barclay's fortunes were at their most critical stage, she became pregnant with her fourth child. Since the nearest doctor was more than twenty miles away, it was decided that she should be driven to the halt on the Tharameka line, and from there go to Mt. Gerard. The weeks that she spent away from her home were weeks of depression, and when her child was born, she felt that she had nothing particular in life to look forward to. She was no longer under the soft influence of the bush, and, taking on the mental attitude of the people amongst whom she was thrown, the solitary life seemed repulsive, an existence to be dreaded. Yet when at last she and her baby returned to the familiar, untidy-looking bungalow set upon its bare ledge of rock, her heart regained something of its former happiness, and not many days passed before she was well assured of that deep peace and silent mystery, which not even the failing fortunes of her husband and his consequent

misery, could disturb. As the months passed and Barclay's position became more desperate, a strange physical relationship, an almost uncanny balancing of forces took place between husband and wife. All those qualities which the man lacked became exaggerated in the woman. His increasing restlessness found its complement in her contentment. As he grew haggard and thin, she became fat, so plump as to be almost lethargic. Her white flesh took on a bloated and unhealthy look. Yet she was happy with that inarticulate happiness which draws its strength from an unconscious assurance, a secret harmony.

II

Martin, the eldest boy, was eight years old when the family first came to the Nallagoo station. The open spaces of unbroken land thrilled with a gentle and persistent touch his awakening imagination; but the tenderness of that impact sank deep into the primitive consciousness which, clear and viscous, welled up within him from the universal fount of life, uncrytallized as yet by experience or thought. His boy's eyes looked out over the desert and saw the beauty of its eternal youthfulness, the beauty of its abiding age and its inscrutable patience. They saw as yet no menace in that soft, honey-sweet smile. It was a play-ground wherein, together with his thoughts, he might wander. The lilac-tinted distances seemed to offer an infinity of adventure and discovery.

The place above all others which gave him the greatest pleasure in these early years was the clay-pan. Close around it clustered several well-grown and comparatively luxuriant wattle-bushes. It was here

among the plumes of yellow blossom that he first learnt to welcome that inexpressibly magical scent, which in later years came to symbolize not only the sweet riches that life had given, but those also which she had withheld. Upon the banks of the clay-pan were reeds and tussocks of grass which grew down into the water, and the boy soon learnt that if in the cool of the evening he sat quietly hidden amongst the reeds, he could see life, other than human life, come furtive and inquisitive, slinking through the grasses to slake its thirst. Here shy, soft-skinned bandicoots would slide their pale-yellow bodies among the plant stems, and lift their little pig-snouts sniffing the air, their bright eyes awake to danger. Wallabies would come like dark shadows; they would approach unseen, and then surprise him by their near presence. So long as he did not move, the wild creatures seemed very fearless; they would come close to him, even sniffing at his elbows and at his shoes.

The first time that a kangaroo came to the pond, Martin was frightened at so large an animal. He drew back among the long grasses afraid even to cry out. On his return to the house, he told his parents of the large strange animal, and they laughed at him telling him that there was no need for fear. That night his father went out and shot the kangaroo. The next day Martin was able to finger its fur and smell its peculiar, pungent odour. He was both glad and sorry that it was dead; glad to be able to have its body to feel with his hands, to have that much power over it, and sorry that its eyes were no longer bright. He feared and respected his father for having killed it. He was always a little afraid of his father, a

little uncomfortable in his presence, half-conscious of the disquiet that rankled within that virile spirit, in that sinewy, strong-smelling body.

In the dry periods, mice and boody-rats swarmed amongst the surviving vegetation that clung to and skirted the edges of the clay-pan. These elegant and large-eyed creatures showed little sign of fear. So long as Martin remained quiet, they would run over him, and take food from his hand, and even search for it in his pockets.

There were other animals that visited the water. There were thousands of insects which moved in or about it, fierce dragon-flies, bright metallic-bodied flies, butterflies, beetles, and of course, ants, all shapes and sizes of ants in their legions. There were lizards of various kinds and there were snakes also. Once when Martin had taken his sister to sit with him in hiding, a large blacksnake returning from its evening drink came unexpectedly upon the children. It paused swaying its head in uncertainty from side to side. Martin felt an instinctive fear, though he had none of the artificial terror which towns-men associate with the personality of the snake. He put his arm about his sister. "Sit very still," he whispered. For thirty seconds or longer, the snake regarded them from his expressionless, lidless eyes, his blue tongue darting back and forth; then lowering his head, he slid away through the grass undergrowth. Birds too from all the district visited the clay-pan. There were cream-pale parrots with a blush of pink on their crests, black parrots with red on the underside of their wings, green and blue parrakeetes, mauve and black wagtails, moving their tails from side to side, with

scores of other little birds. Martin did not know their names, but like Adam he gave them names of his own invention. As the boy grew older, he would wander further from the homestead; sometimes he would take his sister with him, but more often he preferred to be alone. There were elements in his nature, which found their happiness most easily when in direct and unimpeded contact with the dry, bright air, the soft, dusty soil and the hot, yet exhilarating fragrance of that empty land. And even in the driest most unlikely places he found evidence of life. Its forms were vastly entertaining in their variety. He would try to catch the little legless lizards which disappeared in the sand like a flash, but he was never successful; they were too quick for him. But he could catch easily enough the slowly-moving mountain-devil, that most curious of all lizards with its encrusted sides, its thorny protuberances and its deliberate gait, who eats ants with the same thoughtful precision a philosopher might turn over the leaves of a book.

Once in the hollow stem of a dead tree, he found a bush-porcupine. When upon the quills of this unsociable creature he pricked his fingers, he took off his shirt and rolled it in its folds; he then carried it to the nearest ant-heap, and deposited it in the midst. The innocent cruelty of childhood prompted the act; partly, too, a curiosity to know whether the irascible, stinging ants would wake up and make uncurl this stubborn and misanthropic-seeming creature. His admiration for the bush-porcupine went up unexpectedly, when with powerful front claws and agile black tongue it made small work of the ants and their nest.

These solitary wanderings in the bush taught him many things. Among others he learnt how to find his way, and this not so much by any conscious reasoning as to points of the compass, but by unconscious habit, an instinct for direction which was seldom at fault. The desert life seemed full of infinite variety, and in comparison the hours spent within the house were monotonous though not altogether unpleasant. The children found their mother's placid temperament easy to manage. She did not interfere with their activities unless they impeded her own work. Her rather failing vitality allowed them to order, very much as they pleased, their own lives. It was their father and his sudden gusts of irritation of which they learnt to beware. In the first early days he had protested against the ragamuffin state that they so soon slipped into, for the bush life tended to break down all orderliness and convention as to dress and cleanliness. Both the elder children went barefoot, and their scanty clothes took on, as did the skin of their whole bodies, the all-pervading colour of desert dust. But Barclay's protest was half-hearted, he had too much work to do to look after the children; so to their delight and happiness, they were allowed to run wild, though there were certain rules which were definite and not to be broken. If one was late for meals one went without, and both Martin and his sister had to help their mother at certain regular tasks. They had too, under a somewhat haphazard tuition from their mother, to keep up a certain minimum of reading and writing. These lessons were not very onerous, and, although neither of the children acquired much knowledge, the few hours dedicated each week to mental exercise en-

abled them to remember those elements which they had learnt at the infant school in Perth.

By the time Martin was eleven, he had lived three years in the bush, during which period he had not left the Nallagoo station. He was grown to be a somewhat slow-moving, quick-eyed boy, slight almost to thinness, though his muscles were hard and his bones large and well-formed. His blue eyes which he inherited from his mother were rather wide open; the whites were very clear, showing in strong contrast to his tanned skin. His sister, though a year younger, was equal in height, and looked considerably heavier. She was plump, having all her curves well-rounded. After three years of running wild in the bush, she looked a savage little thing. Her dark hair hung about her face in untidy wisps. Her skin was more deeply tanned than her brothers, and her grey eyes had a cold look in them, careless and aloof. Both children, uninstructed in the usual lessons of childhood, knew pretty thoroughly the life of the bush. Their time was spent, severally or together, in wandering over the powdered dust between the sparsely-scattered blue-leaved wattles. This was their playground, and therein they found ample material to satisfy hungry and inquisitive minds. When the sun was too hot for them to wander far from the house, there was a never-failing entertainment in stripping dead bark from the stems of trees, and finding beneath, clusters of beetles, of ticks, of long furry centipedes, and occasionally mottled gecko-lizards, clinging with their cup-shaped toes to the bare wood. They came to know which creatures were harmless and which were to be avoided. Spiders, especially the

small poisonous ones with red tails, centipedes and scorpions they treated with respect mingled with a certain resentment, which at times took the form of a ruthless slaughter. Snakes and the larger lizards, their instinct warned them it were wiser to leave alone. They learnt during these years to use their eyes, and could distinguish and follow up, if need be, the tracks of wallabies, kangaroos and emues.

There was one old emu, with whom, in the early days, they had made friends, and who had taught them much about himself and about his species. Mary had been the first to make his acquaintance. She was standing outside the kitchen rinsing some pans for her mother, when she saw approaching with quick, irregular strides an odd, furry-looking object, raised high on long legs. She kept silent and watched. It halted and seemed to be looking at her intently. After a little, she continued her business with the pans, and, as she moved, she noticed that it flashed a reflection of the sunlight in the direction of the strange bird. The emu approached nearer, evidently attracted, craning its long neck. The girl flashed the pan again, suddenly understanding that she had in her power a lure to attract the bird. She sat down content to wait, playing her game slowly. The emu came to within a few paces. It moved its alert, wedge-shaped head from side to side, peering at her with great liquid eyes. The child noticed with an interested wonder the blue membrane which shot across from one side to the other, covering the eyes completely from time to time. This great bird out of the wild bush had for her a strange, intimate significance; she understood it and loved it, and yet

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as she looked at the large, grim mouth, so truculent in expression, so greedy, she felt afraid; gave a bang on her pan together with a sudden exclamation of alarm. The bird jumped back awkwardly, and when Mary's laugh, half amusement, half relief, broke out, it turned tail and made towards the bush with long, dignified strides.

She told Martin that evening of her new acquaintance, and the next day they went out with jam-tins whose shining surfaces acted as reflectors. The emu responded, and they found that so long as they did not speak, he would come quite close and even take the food that they proffered. They found indeed that he would eat almost anything, and were amused to watch various nubby objects on their way down his gullet.

These early years in the bush passed for the children very happily. The days, though similar, were each full of variegated detail and interest. Martin and his sister were thrown upon their own resources, yet an instinct, equally strong in boy and girl, which tempted them to solitary wanderings, kept their relation sweet and free from boredom.

The mother was always disinclined to go far from the house. She lived shut up within her own moods; she had fallen back upon herself in a kind of nostalgia, produced perhaps by those very qualities of the bush which drew out the wild, shy elements in her children, tempting them to wander further and further from home. She would have liked, had she possessed the energy and the power, to have kept the children within the range of her own imaginings, shut off from the foreign aspects of the land. She had not the courage

to adventure amid that strangeness, and was too tired to follow their young hearts into the alien freedom of the desert. She was repelled and turned back with all the intimate softness of a mother's love to the companionship of her younger child. With Patrick she was happy. Her mild complacency could yet enfold him, and when Michael her baby was born, she loved him the best of all her children for being helpless and content to lie happy and warm against her bosom.

Chapter 2: *Children in the Desert*

I

EVERY year the tribe of the Daku natives, whose territory lay north-westward on the borders of a salt-lake, would visit the Nallagoo station. They would appear usually at the same season; they came silently, men, women and children, with their accompanying dogs, drifting through the bush, and would take up their camping-place close to some water-holes at about half a mile from the homestead. Here they would stay for several months, and then, without warning, and as silently as they had come, they would drift away again and be lost among the feathery vegetation.

These men in their primitive simplicity knew little of malice, they were peaceable and cheerful-minded. They were wild in that they went naked or but very scantily clad, and that they followed no laws but the rigid unwritten laws of the tribe. Without history their traditions had come down through countless generations. Their being was of the desert wilderness, through their senses alone were they conscious. As were the animals and plants so were they the children of the drought, of the fierce sunlight, of the gusty, mad winds of mid-day heat and of the over-arching sky. They moved over the dusty plains, significant, sufficient unto themselves, sensual in single-

mindfulness and cheerful in the absence of self-comprehension. For the most part they had come into contact with the white settlers and learned to speak a few words of pidgin-English, but they remained untouched in outlook, entirely foreign. Where the contact becomes close, as in the south, they die, for they are not able to sustain a conscience so ruthless as the white man's. In the north they yet remain, living the nomad lives of hunters, killing their own meats, and moving from one hunting-ground to another. They build no houses or tents, but, where they camp, merely pile a few branches together as a break-wind. Though not accustomed to work in the sense of arduous and continual labour, they willingly enough give their services in exchange for such luxuries as white flour, tobacco-plug or tinned beef. They would have worked thus for Barclay, but from the first he had been suspicious of them. He found something anti-pathetic in their easy-going contentedness. This people, without laws or conventions that he could understand, he looked upon as a vagabond and useless lot. He suspected that they would only too willingly spear his sheep and cattle; in this he was not far wrong, but he did not see that the remedy lay in his employing them as herdsmen and outriders with definite wage paid in the foods that they loved. He did not trouble to understand them any more than he troubled to understand himself or his wife. He merely worked on doggedly against the elemental forces of whose quality and scope he had little comprehension. Willingly he would have seen all the aborigines dead and safely buried under the red dust of their native desert. He did not have the temerity

to declare open war, but he made it plain that they were not welcome in the vicinity of Nallagoo. He, on his part, kept well away from the native camp.

This attitude of suspicion towards the natives was inevitably taken by his wife. In her eyes they were ugly, dirty, shameless and evil-smelling. She refused to follow the example of other squatters' wives, who, being more open-minded, took the native women into their service, teaching them to cook and to wash. She was most anxious that her children should keep separate from, and not mix with the naked, black pickaninnies. Martin and Mary were brought up to fear and avoid their bush neighbours; their father forbade them to go near the camp.

For the first year the prohibition held sway against the natural curiosity of youth. The children had besides a dread of the silently moving people of the desert, so different from themselves. They did not walk often in the direction of the camp, and whenever they saw a black man or woman they ran back towards the house. It was not till the second migration of the natives that this restraint broke down.

It was in the afternoon after the principal heat of the day, Martin was more than a mile from the homestead and had been following a bandicoot, which for some distance had dodged between bushes and clumps of grass, and had finally gone to earth. The boy was standing beside the hole into which the little creature had disappeared, and was rather ruefully concluding that to catch bandicoots was beyond his powers. They had always foiled him thus. He was poking the mouth of the hole with a stick, when he suddenly became aware of a full-grown black-fellow

who was watching from about forty yards distant. He felt frightened. All the alien quality of the land was concentrated in that figure. The eyes of the man were upon him, he could not tell how hostile. He was afraid to run, knowing that he could be easily outstripped. He stood still, but through his fear there burnt up a small spark of curiosity. He gazed stolidly, unmoving. He could see that the man was smiling and looked friendly. Gestures were being made, beckonings. Martin stood riveted to the ground and watched with apprehension the stranger come quickly but very quietly towards him. He was completely frightened now but did not dare to move.

When the native was only a few feet distant, he paused. His flattened nose with large nostrils, large mouth and low forehead were indicative of a psyche entirely other than that of the white boy, but the look was friendly and spread to a grin. In the look there was the far-back human quality of distant ages, it was simple, entirely simple, without thought or self-consciousness. The mind of this man was as naked and unpretentious as his body, and when he spoke in the bastard jargon of pidgin-English he appeared both pathetic and naïf. He pointed to himself and nodded.

"This one fellow, Jacky Jones, good one, white-fellow name." By this he meant that this was the name given him by the white men. "Jacky Jones, good-fellow name," he repeated.

Martin smiled, it certainly was a funny-sounding name, and seemed somehow reassuring.

"What one your name?" queried the native.

Martin whispered his name.

"Martee, good-fellow name that," said Jacky

smacking his thigh as if hugely pleased, then looking down at the hole: "What way you catchum bandicoot?"

Martin didn't quite understand, but Jacky didn't wait for an explanation. He went down on his hands and knees and smelt at the mouth of the hole. He wrinkled up his nostrils like a dog, then he looked up and made a face, drawing his lips back and exposing his teeth. Martin laughed, and the black man laughed with him. Without any further comment or explanation he picked a handful of leaves, rolled them into a ball, and stuffed them into the mouth of the hole. Then he began to dig at about two yards distance with the point of the spear he was carrying. After a while he gave a grunt of satisfaction, scratched with his hands, and thrusting in his arm, drew out a dusty and struggling bandicoot.

Martin held out his hands with an exclamation of pleasure.

"You keep him live-fellow?"

"Oh yes."

The bandicoot struggled in the boy's hands, but after a little seemed to forget his fear and became quiet. Martin was so delighted with the new capture that he quite forgot his apprehension of the black, who stood by smiling, obviously pleased with himself.

"You see, he get plenty tame by and by. . . . You know what tucker he eat?"

Again the boy failed to understand. This new, half-familiar language was a strain on his intelligence.

Jacky Jones turned to an acacia bush, and after half a minute's search held up two large, grey grasshoppers in his slender brown fingers. He offered

these to the bandicoot, who, seemingly reconciled to his captivity, seized them in his little sharp teeth. Then holding them in his fore-paws as a squirrel would hold a nut, he devoured all but the sharply-serrated hind legs. He then lifted his pink snout as if looking for more.

Martin was delighted. He looked up at the native, and, imitating his strange talk said boldly, "You catch-um other-fellow like that."

"All right, I catch-um plenty," said Jacky laughing, and they set off together on a further search.

When he returned home that evening, Martin, besides having three bandicoots in his possession, had his heart full of secret excitement. This was his first great adventure. As soon as he had an opportunity he would tell Mary about his new friend, and together they would go and see him again, often and often. He longed to tell his mother, but would not dare for fear that he might be forbidden further intercourse with the enchanting Jacky Jones, that most seductive trapper of bandicoots.

II

The following spring and early summer brought happiness and wonder. In the native camp, the children found the playmates for whom they had unconsciously longed. The black fellows and their women-folk had all the gaiety of youth's unconcern. Their simplicity was, on the surface not difficult to comprehend; they had besides a deep knowledge of all the live things that move in the bush. The more mysterious and menacing expressions which are to be found in a native camp were hidden from the two

children: for being children they were respected, and the strong taboos placed on sex and religion shielded their immaturity. Before their unsuspecting and as yet unselfconscious eyes was displayed, in all the naïve spontaneity of our early ancestors, the diversified tapestry of human life. A recognition of its exactions and penalties was presented without any shame or mock-modesty. The little black babies at their mothers' breasts were silently questioned and accepted with the same childish wonder as was the pungent odour of the natives themselves, or the seeming fierce barking of the camp dogs.

Before long they began to pick up phrases of the language, but even though they knew but the merest smattering and the natives but a little pidgin-English, it did not seem difficult to understand one another. A kind of sense-cognition established itself, for when the senses are yet liquid, undifferentiated by the hardening process of civilization, the means of communication are more direct than those of articulate phrases.

Often the children would sit together under the shade of wattles and mulga bushes within the precincts of the camp. They did not usually talk much together because the silent heat of the desert and the still, sweet-scented air did not move them to speech, but rather enjoined silence. Sometimes they would lie down and sleep for no other reason but that the natives lay sleeping in the sun, and sometimes they would sit watching the idle movements of some man or woman who moved languidly from one place to another, or the strange way they would expand their nostrils to scent the air, lift their heads and glance round, suddenly alert and wild. They

were happy in that indolence, and were filled with a sense of communion with the men and women so different, yet so like themselves in the simple elements of humanity, whose minds and bodies were in harmony with the candour and seeming clemency of the land, over whose arid plains they wandered.

Harmony such as this was not to be found in the straggling bungalow at Nallagoo. It was something apart. When the children went out into the bush, they left behind a large portion of that individuality which life in the family produced. Their consciousness became free and less well-defined. It was as if they were able to escape from the circumstance of present-day, European children, and reach back into the past, living the lives of their prehistoric ancestors. When they returned home, they deliberately put aside the mysterious past of the race into which they had dipped, and became once more the children of their parents; they took on the white man's characteristics, each playing naturally his part in the complex of family life. The pristine, free happiness of the native camp, coloured as it strangely seemed with both a quality of self-restraint and of abandon, was like a world of faerie which they would gladly have kept hidden. . . . For a time they succeeded, but it was not possible to conceal for very long the results of so deep an experience.

When their father found out that they had been visiting the native camp, he was so angry that the whole family became mute and terrified. He would not have his children, he declared, growing up half white and half native, like some of the wild bush-children that ran screaming at the sight of a stranger.

Not while he had blood and strength to prevent it. He thrashed both the boy and the girl, swinging them round by the arm and slashing at them with a stick. That was a mere fore-taste of what they might expect if ever they went near the camp again. He promised them such a hiding that neither of them would be able to lie down for a month. Martin's heart became black with an impotent rage; he had never liked his father, now he hated him.

That he should have less opportunity of going to the camp, his father decided that he was old enough to help with the farm work. From this quarter came unexpected consolation. Martin was given a pony that was to be his own to ride, feed and groom, and, though he was only eleven years old, he met this advancement with enthusiasm. It was not long before he loved the pony even more than he loved the black fellows. The new work too had attractions of its own. Sometimes he would start early in the morning before sunrise and ride with his father, guiding his pony between the feathery-branched bushes, out toward the open plains of saltbush scrub. It was his business to keep a look-out for the sheep. The flocks were wild and not easily to be approached; their colour blended with the mauve-blue of the distance, making them difficult, almost impossible to be seen. He loved to watch the dogs at work. His father would whistle and point in the direction of the sheep. His dog would look with bright intelligent eyes, and, as soon as he had understood, off he would go, not in the direction indicated but at right angles. He would go right away out of sight, and the man

and the boy would wait while the dog made a long flanking movement to get round on the far side of the distant flock. In about ten minutes, sometimes longer, they would see the grey mass of startled sheep come billowing toward them in irregular waves.

Of the dogs he made close friends, and when Lulu had her first family, he was given one of them for his own. But this was nearly two years later when he had learnt to manage the dogs as well as any experienced bushman.

Sometimes he would go with his father after cattle. The great beasts were terrifying, with their staring eyes and sharp horns. It was with mingled fear and delight that he would cling tight with his knees while the pony galloped all-out on the flank of the big herd, and his father raced ahead cracking his whip and shouting. He had to ride firmly with his hands to prevent the pony pulling in toward the mob. There was real danger here, for if once he was pulled in amongst the galloping cattle, he would surely be horned and trampled. He saw his father in a new light, and liked him better out of doors than in the house. The voice which used to make him wince with apprehension had now a quality of true command; this man must needs be respected for his strength and the hard effort he put into his work.

At first Martin would be very tired after the long day's exposure in the blazing sun, but often there would be respites when for whole days he would lounge away his time in the shade while his father was engaged in some work, which was considered too hard for the boy to attempt.

III

At this time life was not so interesting for Mary. Now that Martin had gone to work with his father, she was left with no playmate but little Patrick who was only three years old. She would play with him, pretending to be his mother, and that was all very well but she missed Martin terribly. Patrick was too young as yet to be a companion, besides he was forbidden to go far from the house. She used sometimes to play with him outside the kitchen door in the shade cast by the wall, and then she would get bored and not know what to do with herself. Her mother seldom asked her to help in the house work, but often Mary would ask to be allowed to help. Sometimes when she was working with her mother, they would talk together; what was said never interested her very much, and in a childish way she would wonder what it was her mother thought about or hoped for. Once she said, "Mother, when we leave here, where shall we go?"

Her mother looked surprised. "When we leave here? What do you mean?"

"Will we stay here always?"

Her mother looked away, stood quite still, forgetful of what she was doing and did not answer. The child watched her, puzzled, then feeling suddenly uncomfortable, went on with her work. Her mother remained quite still, looking away over the desert, then, after more than a minute's interval, she came and put her arms round her holding her close against her soft, warm body. To Mary's surprise she began to sob, first little short sobs, then deep long ones, great

sobs that shook her body and came tearing their way up from her heart. For a long time she clung to the child. Mary because she was frightened cried also; then as her mother's weeping became quieter, she cried because she found it pleasant and easy to cry when her mother was crying.

But the question remained unanswered.

Sometimes she would gaze at her mother and wonder why she was so dull, so fat and so taken up with the baby. She could not understand why her mother should be so uninteresting. She longed for the days when Martin was free to stay at home. On these rare, happy days, they would slink off into the bush together. Sometimes they would meet one or other of the natives but not often. They did not forget their father's threat, and were afraid to go to the camp. When they were in the bush they were happy; during the mid-day heat they would lie in the shade of the thickest bushes they could find; they would sleep, and when it was cooler, would wander about looking in the hollow stems of dead trees for rabbits or bush-porcupines, or would follow the flocks of small birds that went twittering from bush to bush, or seek for the curious stick-shaped insects and the praying-mantis which clung to the grey twigs which they so closely resembled. And sometimes they would both get on to Martin's pony and ride to the borders of the big salt-lake where the country was open and the bushes grew no more than a foot high, where one could see for miles and miles over the shimmering, heat-stricken plains.

Once on the shores of the lake, Mary asked: "What will you do, Martin, when you are a man?"

He answered slowly, "I shall work and buy land of my own, and have a farm of my own."

"Will you always stay on it?"

The boy considered for a moment, "No, I don't think so."

"I shouldn't want to," she said. "I should have a horse and ride about all over the place."

"Yes, so would I," said Martin. "Why do white people always stay in one place and not go trekking like the black fellows?"

"I suppose it's because they have got more things," said the girl.

At that they left it, not knowing yet what yearnings were forming in their hearts. When ever they found opportunity, they made their expeditions further and further from the homestead.

Chapter 3: *A Long Trek*

THESE had been a good rain-fall that winter, such a rain-fall as Barclay had prayed for the previous year, and which, had it come in time, might have saved his failing fortunes. Now when he had sold all his land, it came seeming to mock him, and show the results of his four years' work, which would make even more rich the rich man who had bought him out: the man who could afford to wait regardless of the seasons. The natives moved their camp soon after the rain-fall, and trekked Northward, leaving the region round Nallagoo deserted. Barclay was glad to see them go, and, now that there was no chance of the children straying to the camp, he relaxed his tight hold on the boy, leaving him to wander to his heart's content. He was especially glad that the natives had gone, for the time for shearing was approaching, and he would have to leave home for two months or longer, and live at the shearing sheds near Tharameka some twenty-seven miles distant. At the time of shearing every man was needed to work to his uttermost. Thousands of sheep were driven in from all the country-side, even from thirty and forty miles distant. They passed under the clippers; and all down the long sheds the men worked in rows handling the swift, machine-driven blades. It was dexterous, well-paid work. There was competition as to who

could tell the largest number of clean-cut fleeces by the end of the day. Barclay was amongst the best of the shearers, but was accounted rather rough in his handling of the sheep.

For two months he was compelled to leave his wife and children, but this was the custom of the country and considered no great hardship. Many of the men were in like position. He promised that he would ride over some Sunday and see how things were getting on. This same promise he had made on previous years, but he had never come; each Sunday had found him too tired to ride the long miles both home and back. He was glad to be going. It was a change in the ordinary routine. He liked the company of the other men, and knew that here at any rate he could earn sure money. With what he earned he might be able to buy back a small part of his land.

The children looked forward to their father's departure. They remembered the year before when he had been away. It had been a happy time; a different atmosphere had developed within the house, their mother had seemed happier and less apathetic. They became less afraid of lifting their voices, and with their voices their spirits had risen.

When the day of Barclay's departure came, Martin rode with him for a mile or two, as far as the outer wire of the first paddock. Barclay gave directions as to certain of the animals; there was little to be done, merely the shifting of flocks from one area to another, but Martin felt proud of his responsibility. It was to him his father looked should anything go wrong. Of course there was small chance of anything happening out of the usual, but still he played

half-hopefully in his mind with that eventuality. Although he was not yet quite thirteen years old, he felt man enough to answer adequately the trust. At such times as this, when they talked about the business of the farm, he was drawn to his father, and, when at parting, Barclay stooped to brush his cheek with his rough beard and moustache, he felt both pain and joy.

For ten days everything went smoothly at the homestead. The children were happy in their greater freedom, and their mother seemed in better spirits. Then out of the blue of a cloudless sky came the catastrophe. Life that had been so passive and slumberous seemed as it were to open its eyes suddenly and stare the children in the face. What awoke them to so poignant a sense of life was the sharp contact with death, and with the touch of death, the touch of fear.

Martin had been wandering that morning in the bush and had returned late for the mid-day meal. He found Mary and the two babies alone in the kitchen. Michael was about eighteen months at this time, and Patrick four years. They were all subdued and very quiet. Mary came towards him with a white, tear-stained face.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Mother's at the clay-pan; she's in the water and won't move."

A strange, physical fear made him feel suddenly short of breath. "What is it she's doing at the clay-pan?"

"She's been washing clothes."

"Yes, but what's the matter?"

"I don't know; she won't move and won't talk and all her dress is wet."

Other questions streamed through his head but he did not ask them. "Come with me," he said. "Patrick, you stay here and look after baby. It's all right. I'll come back quite soon. Now don't cry." He gave his brother a shake. He felt inclined to cry himself, but if anything was really wrong? . . . Oh he must hold himself together, be ready for whatever might befall. Already in his mind he knew the worst, had grasped it with a terrible pain and fear.

At the clay-pan he found his mother lying half in and half out of the water. Together the two children pulled her on to dry land. Martin called to her and shook her. He could get no answer. All the time he knew that she was dead.

"How long ago did you find her?"

"A long time."

He listened for her heart and her breathing. There was no good in holding back his knowledge. "She's dead, quite dead," he said.

"Oh, Martin!"

"Don't cry, you mustn't cry." There was an angry ring in his voice. "It's no good crying."

Both the children had seen dead animals and knew very well the appearance of death, but they had not thought of it as touching themselves or any of their family. They stood gazing at the dead body of their mother. It was pathetic, terrible in its awkwardness. It appeared so out of shape. Martin, in spite of his anger at his sister's tears, now began to cry softly to himself. After a little he became silent, and began to pull his mother's apron up over her head.

"What are you going to do?" whispered the girl.

"It's to cover her from the flies."

"Oughtn't she to be buried?"

After a long pause, he shook his head.

"What are we to do?"

"I must find father. I'll ride and find him. I know where he is, and which way to start off."

Mary began to cry again. "Oh, Martin, no. You mustn't leave me alone. I won't stay here alone with the babies."

"Are you afraid to stay alone?"

"Yes."

He considered for a moment. "Very well, I'll take you all along with me."

When they got back to the house, they found the younger children comparatively cheerful. Martin regarded them thoughtfully for a little, then he went out and sat down upon the stump of a felled tree; he looked round him into the bush which had been his playground and now was to become the field of his adventure.

He did not as yet feel any sadness at the death of his mother, and the tears which had flowed were the result of shock rather than of the painful squeezing of the heart. His mind was numbed with a sudden and complete knowledge; with the possible causes of death he did not concern himself; the fact was final, and elaboration was useless. Upon his mind crowded the hazards that remained for those that were yet alive. He knew that the younger children had taken up most of his mother's care; towards them lay his greatest responsibility. Fortunately they were too young to know anything of their danger; he himself was entirely

vague as to what chances he might have of success. For a few moments he considered the possibility of remaining at the homestead till his father's return, but that thought was not to be entertained; all his instinct was for action, action which would at least hold off the panic ready to settle upon waiting solitude. He was horrified at the idea of remaining so near the dead, unburied body. He knew the effects of heat upon the dead bodies of animals, terror lay in the very thought.

If the natives had been at the camp, he could have persuaded one of them to take a message, but they had gone far away; everything depended upon himself. He would have to find his way across the desert to where his father was at the shearing sheds, and, since he could not leave the others behind, he would have to take them along too. Patrick and the baby would have to be carried, he would have to take them in the old pram. The pram was one that his mother had brought with her when she had first come to Nallagoo. It had been Patrick's. Sometimes he had known his mother take the baby out in it, but mostly she used it for carrying clothes to and from the clay-pan. Martin remembered that it was standing not far from her body. He could take the babies in that; he would have to carry food and drink also for the journey. He turned to his sister and told her of the thoughts that were in his mind.

Together they went back to the clay-pan, and now that action was decided upon, they talked a good deal; their voices kept up their spirits; this enterprise had the savour of real adventure. They spread the clothes that were in the pram over the dead body that

the flies might be kept away, then they hurried back to the homestead. On their way they talked excitedly of the food that would be necessary, and of the time that the long journey might take. Their inexperience was not daunted by the long desert trek, and that evening they were so full of preparations that they did not notice very much the absence of their mother. It was rather fun getting their own meal and searching through the cupboards that had always been forbidden to them. When night came and it was time to sleep, Martin instead of sleeping in his own little room, as he usually did, lay down beside his sister. He was glad to feel her arms round him and her warm breath on his cheek.

He woke early and while it was yet dark roused the others. They must start while it was yet cool, so as to be well on their way and able to rest when the sun was high and scorching overhead. The children breakfasted by lamplight. Martin, setting a good example, told them to eat all that they could, they would need it, and would not have much on the journey. After the meal came the packing of the pram. It seemed terribly overloaded. Patrick was much too big, and looked like a cuckoo in a small bird's nest. "Can't I walk?" he asked. "No, you'll get too tired. You wouldn't be able to walk fast enough. You must sit as still as you can," Martin told him.

It was a tight fit. Patrick and the baby sat face to face. The baby was rather squashed under Patrick's fat legs. Between them and into every corner of the old pram were wedged tins of preserved food; these were treats kept for special occasions, but now freely ransacked. Two loaves of bread were tied on

top in a towel, and in front of the pram on the iron frame-work were swung two canvas water-bottles. Martin had thought of using the pony to help pull the load, but had decided that this was too risky an undertaking as the pony was quite unbroken to harness. He was sorry to have to leave him behind, but like the other half-wild horses of the bush he would be able to find his own food and look after himself till Barclay should return.

Before the sun was risen the swaying, top-heavy pram had started on the dusty track. Mary walked in front, pulling on a rope, and Martin, with his hands on the back rail to steady it, pushed from behind. Lulu and her one puppy, the only one she had been allowed to keep, ran nosing into the bush on either side. At first the going did not seem very difficult; the surface of the ground was fairly hard, and the track which they were following seemed to stretch endlessly out before them over the great plain. For a time they plodded slowly forward in silence. It was hard work and slower than they had hoped, but they progressed. And when the sun rose and cast from the stunted bushes long violet shadows, the homestead was already out of sight, shut out by the feathery branches of acacia and she-oak. Around on all sides was the silent, mysterious land. It seemed to be just waking from sleep and smiling at the memory of its dreams. Fresh and very young, this desert region was not yet aware of the advent of mankind upon the earth. It had not woken yet from its age-long dream, its unmolested slumber; what had it to do with these children who crawled over its surface; what concern had it with their courage or their despair? A few

birds began to pipe melancholy notes at long intervals. The pram progressed, lurching from side to side.

Martin's troubles started an hour later when the sun was already hot overhead. After whining for a short while, the baby was very sick. This was no doubt partly due to the swaying of the pram, partly to the heat of the sun and partly to the large and rather rich breakfast that Mary, under her brother's directions, had urged upon him. It was not long before Patrick followed his example. This entailed two halts and a complete turn-out of the pram. Martin and his sister were business-like under this adversity, not at all daunted. They shook and slapped their younger brothers and lifted them back into the pram, which was no light job. But all the slapping in the world would not have prevented them howling their very best. Martin set his jaw and pushed at the pram which seemed additionally top-heavy and awkward. This was not going to be any picnic; it began to dawn on him that it might be a terrible adventure which would need all his boy's courage to carry safely through. After a while the babies stopped their howling through exhaustion; they lay restlessly in uncomfortable-looking positions. Martin pushed steadily at the rail and Mary tugged at the rope.

After a mile or so of further progress, Patrick woke up and wanted a drink. "You can't have any yet," said Martin.

"Why not?"

"There won't be enough left."

"Why not?"

"There won't, shut up."

Patrick who was not accustomed to being denied a drink of water, began to howl; this woke the baby and they howled together.

At about an hour before mid-day, Martin called his first halt. They rested under a group of salmon-gums, and, although the shade from the feathery branches was but sparse, it sheltered them from the direct glare of the sun. Here they had their first meal and their first much needed drink, after which they lay on the ground and slept.

As soon as the sun was sloping westward, the pram was loaded once more. Patrick by this time was thoroughly fractious and resented being packed into so small a space. He was smacked and shoved down into the pram as far as he would go. The baby, who was still sleepy, was wedged between his legs. The elder children, now considerably rested, though stiff from the morning's hard work, took their places and began once more to propel the heavy pram along the light track of hoof-marks made by their father's horse. For some distance this track was easy to follow; it led over familiar ground, past two huts which were frequently used; but at the furthest wire fence of the Nallagoo station it had swerved to the right and plunged into the bush. Martin, who was accustomed to following up the spoors of wallabies and even such small animals as bandicoots, did not find any difficulty in tracking the hoof-marks. But now as he pushed on doggedly towards the end of the first day, he saw that these tracks joined with those of another horse-man, who, as he judged, had ridden more recently over the same ground. The two tracks intermingled and together were not difficult to follow.

It would have been easy for him to have gone on without a check, but he had learnt tracking from the black fellows, so he went down on his hands and knees and looked closely at the separate set of hoof-marks till he could see the difference between those made by his father's horse and those made by that of the stranger. He did not do this from any conscious fear of being beguiled on to the wrong track, but because it had become a habit, almost an instinct, to make sure of any spoor that he was following. This knowledge was useful when about three miles further on the two trails divided, one swerving off to the left. Again the boy went down on his hands and knees, while Mary stood by watching him anxiously. He looked up nodding his head. "It's all right," he said and pointed to the marks that led straight on into the desert.

They camped early that night. In the tropics, darkness follows quickly upon sunset, and since the moon was not yet risen, it would have been impossible to have seen the guiding marks on the dust. The children were all tired, and Martin was disappointed at the slow rate of progress. He had hoped to be able to come much faster and be further on the journey. There had been many halts; so many little accidents had happened that he had not anticipated. He tried to reckon how far they had come. He thought fifteen miles at the least, and they had been working at the pram for nearly nine hours out of the fourteen since they had left the homestead.

As soon as they were taken out of the pram, Patrick and the baby fell fast asleep. Martin thought it a pity to wake them so he and Mary had their supper

alone. Lulu and her puppy came up for their share, and were allowed a short lap at the precious water. Mary fell asleep while she was eating, and in her sleep gave little grunts and jerks as if she were still pulling at the rope. Martin picked up the broken pieces of food and put them safe in the pram. He tied Lulu to one of the wheels; she would bark if dingoes came to try and steal. Then at last, he lay down on the red soil to sleep through his first night in the open desert. He lost consciousness as his head touched the ground, but through his dreams ran the thought that, however much his shoulders and arms ached, he must go on pushing at the pram, pushing, pushing.

The morning sunlight cast slanting rays upon the little procession which was already some distance from last night's resting place. The red dust lay before them and behind and on every side. It was the same without variation. The brittle-stemmed mulga-bushes with their feathery branches were similar to those that they had passed twenty-four hours earlier. How was it possible to register an advance in this country which seemed always the same? One might go on for ever or walk round in circles. Similar insects buzzed on the spikes of spinifex grass, the same birds flitted by. Bright parrakeets perched in the bushes and flashed by in streaks of green and blue. Yet the children were different from those others who had left Nallagoo so hopefully. The miles they had accomplished were recorded on their tired faces, in their aching limbs. Martin knew himself to be changed. His courage though not diminished was charged with a kind of desperation. He could only push the pram

very slowly. He did not speak nor look on either side, but pushed steadily on. He did not answer when his younger brothers cried or protested; he looked at them angrily, disdainfully. His shoulders and arms ached, his back ached down to the loins, but he could still push at the hated rail. Very slowly the pram lurched forward. Mary still walked in front pulling on the rope, but she did not pull with the same weight as yesterday. The younger children were also changed; instead of loudly howling their protests and their indignation, they lay still and whimpered. Their faces were blistered, and they cried almost continually even in their sleep.

And now the procession stops and looks back. The puppy who has been lagging behind has sat down and is showing as clearly as puppy can show that he can go no further. His mother stands near him and barks, then she runs forward a little distance. The puppy moves a step or two forward and sits down again. Martin calls to him; he looks up but doesn't move. Martin calls again. The puppy lies down and whines. "Wait here," said the boy. "I shall go back and fetch him." He trudged back over the way he had come, picked up the puppy, who greeted him with a tired wag of the tail, and carried him back to where the others were waiting. A small space was found in the already overladen pram, and the journey continued.

As they progress the country changes character, the mulga bushes become fewer and cease, only the spinifex grass, in tufts forming long, irregular lines, stretches away to the horizon. Progress is more difficult here. The soil is more sandy, and the wheels of the pram

sink deeper. The sun is a malignant blaze of fire overhead, and the short halts that the children take are frequent. Mary has been crying softly to herself for some time, but she still continues to pull on the rope. When she can control her tears, she stops and turns to her brother. "Martin, aren't we going to rest soon?"

"There's no shade, we can't rest here."

"Just for a little. I'm so tired."

"All right, for a little while."

They halt, but Martin cannot rest. A terrible fear is whispering at his heart: he must push on while he has yet strength, the far-removed, unhuman quality of the desert is oppressing his heart. The bland and candid smile of this land which he has loved so much is terrible in its aloofness. If he pauses, fear will weaken him, turning his blood to water. He dare not rest. He goes back to the iron rail of the pram and begins to push on it. Mary follows, she goes to her place and pulls on the rope. To ward off that fear, Martin tries to occupy his mind by noticing the different creatures of the desert. The little legless lizards that he has so often tried to catch lie basking and disappear like a flash into the sand as his footsteps draw near. Big green cockroaches sit on the flowers of the spinifex waving their long antennæ. Wasp-like flies hover in the air. Ants of all sizes, some of which he has never seen before, run hither and thither over the surface of the ground. Two large red-brown crows keep fluttering and perching close beside the track. He had seen crows like this before, but only at a distance; now they are quite close. He recognizes that they are following him,

and, with an instinctive dread, looks straight ahead to where the track of horse-hoofs is faintly discernible in the sand.

Towards mid-day, the children pause, bewildered. To the left is the white, encrusted rim of a salt-marsh; beyond this line of white is a shimmering haze whose surface undulates into waves and ripples. As they watch the waves seem to rise higher, and glassy layers, which look like water, appear one beyond the other, rising up into the sky. The mirage flows out before them and behind, clipping them as in a horse-shoe, and on all sides the false-water rises and ebbs. The surface is twisted and torn by faint, hot gusts of wind into wisps of shining vapour, which are in shape like the bodies of fantastic creatures, which run over the vibrating sheen of water beneath. And now in recurring lines beyond the horizon there appear images of the desert, trees and low scrub, salt-bush, and here and there cattle, large beyond all natural proportion. As the children watch, the forms alter their shape, they merge into and replace one another. The sea of shimmering vapour rises higher; it seems but a little way distant, breast-high it trembles against an invisible barrier. The boy and girl look at each other, and then, because of the apprehension that has come upon them, they begin to sob to themselves. The girl stands beside her brother, she puts out her arms and clings to him. Together they gaze at the strange creatures that move up and down over the surface of that sea.

As Martin watches, his fear slowly leaves him. He no longer sobs, but gazes as if in a trance at the changing images of that silver-cool, most marvellous

ocean. To his boy's heart comes the first knowledge of illusion. A flutter of happiness brushes, like a bird's wing, his innermost senses. He tastes an unexpected freedom; the world is changed into unsubstantial air and vapour.

From out of that realm of fancy, out of its strangely consoling beauty, he comes back with a start. The ground whereon he stands remains hard and unyielding; he, too, in the bitter consciousness of thirst and exhaustion remains real; real, too, the hateful, lurching pram and the sun-blistered, suffering faces of his brothers. A pulse of courage mingled with despair stirs in him; he has but to follow the track which he has chosen, the hoof-marks of his father's horse are still there, still discernible in the dust at his feet. His hand tightens on his sister's arm. "Mary girl."

"Yes."

"We must go on. It's no good staying here. Perhaps in a little while we'll find some shade where we can rest."

Mary looked at the false water and at the fading figures which fled over its surface. "All these strange things," she said.

"Don't look at them if you're frightened. They don't do any harm."

"No, but . . ."

"They are all right. Pull a little further on the rope, then we'll rest."

In a little distance the ground became harder, the wheels did not sink so far into the dust. The false water drew away from around them, but when they looked back, the mirage lay like a sea, bronze and green over the marsh. The sun sinking westward was

reflected in three separate sunsets over an illusory and unsubstantial ocean.

Martin had been pushing, with but short intervals of rest through the heat of the day. The work had grown heavier and heavier; often he noticed that the rope upon which Mary had been pulling, hung slack, so that he had the whole weight of the pram to propel forward. The girl was exhausted, and it was with difficulty that she kept her place in front of the pram. When Martin complained that she wasn't pulling, she would make an effort to tauten the rope, but it would soon fall slack again.

Often they are tempted to halt and rest in the open blaze of the sun, but fear drives them on. The two red crows keep unpleasantly close; their hoarse cries give a peculiar feeling of unrest. Flies swarm about the children, settling in black masses. Both crows and flies combine to form an evil fancy of dark, malignant creatures, an embodiment of the desert's suddenly revealed hostility. At last there are trees in the distance. Martin pushes toward them, and now, most welcome sight of all, the tracks of thousands of sheep come sweeping across the line that they are following. The marks of the horse-hoofs are now entirely lost, but that does not matter; Martin knows that it is safe to follow the wide, well-beaten track-way of the sheep.

At sunset they are still some little distance from the trees, but they are too tired to go any further. They halt for the night. In Martin's heart rises the hope that early on the morrow he will be at the shearing sheds. He opens the last tin of preserved milk and mixes it with the remaining water. The baby

who is now very quiet has his share poured between his swollen lips. Their last supply of liquid is now gone. They sleep without supper, having no hunger for dry food.

Before sunrise they are awakened by Lulu's barking. She is infuriated at the crows that attempt to perch on the pram. Stiff and tired, Martin rouses his sister; the pram is once more loaded, and before long they are on the way again. They pass by the trees which were their beacon all yesterday. Men have camped there not many days before. They look anxiously for water, but there is no well as they had hoped. The character of the country again alters, bushes and trees shut out the view in front. They follow in the track-way of the sheep and plod wearily on. The sun rises higher, flies buzz in clouds above their heads, the crows still follow with short flights and harsh cries.

Now at last they can see the long roofs of the shearing-sheds. New courage comes at the sight, and as they draw near, they can hear the bleating of sheep. No one seems to be aware of them as they cross the open space in front of the sheds. Martin looks down the long line of workers; he sees his father, and pushes the pram in that direction. A dog barks, one of the men sees the children and makes an exclamation. Then Martin sees his father rise from his shearing and come towards him. "What brings you here, boy?" he asked.

Martin could see that there were both anger and fear in his father's eyes. "Mother's dead," he said simply.

"Dead, what d'you mean?"

"She died down in the clay-pan. Mary found her first. I saw her too."

Martin saw the veins on his father's forehead swell. The face that stared down on him was very red, and the boy thought that his father was going to strike him. He saw the great brown, sinewy arms raised above his head, he heard a deep groan come up from the man's stomach, a groan that was half an oath. The great body staggered away and collapsed upon the ground. For a moment Barclay did not move, then slowly, like a man who is recovering from a physical blow, groped his way to a seat. He sat with his head in his hands while Martin stared at him. He did not move.

For the last time the boy put his weight against the rail of the pram and pushed it into the shade cast by the high wall of the shed. One of the men had come forward and was standing beside him. "Where do you come from, sonnie?" he said.

"From Nallagoo."

The man whistled. "My word," he exclaimed.

Martin lifted the puppy down from the pram. "All right, sonnie, I'll help you," said the man. He took the two babies out and laid them upon newly-cut fleeces. Patrick had long since become as quiet as the baby. "Poor little devils, they are pretty well done in." Then turning to Martin: "But they are alive all right. They'll soon pick up when they've had a rest and some food."

Several men had now gathered in a group round the children. Martin asked for water. They brought a little but would not let either of the children drink

very much. "That will do for the present, mustn't have too much at once." They had to drag the cup away. "You can have some more in a little. . . . Have you come all that way pushing the pram?"

Martin nodded. These men were kindly, he could feel their kindness, but he was suddenly too tired to talk. He walked up to the babies and saw that they were fast asleep. The puppy and Lulu were also stretched full length and unconscious. The men had flung down some more fleeces, and were watching him. He turned to his sister. "It's all right, you can rest now," he said. She was too tired even to smile, but lay down beside her younger brothers and slept. A moment later, Martin sank deliciously into the soft wool. As he fell asleep, broken sentences swam in his half-consciousness.

"Well that beats everything. . . . Damn fine kid . . . all the bloody way, pushing the bloody pram all the way from Nallagoo. . . . The little bleeding babies and the puppy and all. . . . I'm b——"

He was not sure of the import of the oft-repeated word, but felt that somehow it signified a high and heart-felt praise.

Chapter 4: *Alec Shaw*

I

ALL the next day and the day following, Martin lay upon the fleeces. For the most part he slept, but at intervals he was shaken out of his slumbers and given food and drink. It was pleasant to lie motionless on the heaped, strong-smelling fleeces and to feel, in those happy moments of half-consciousness between waking and sleeping, that there was no need to do anything but to lie still, to know that his task was done, and that now he could rest. On the afternoon of the second day, he woke up, stretched himself and began to take notice. His sister was no longer beside him where she had lain, and the two babies had also been moved. He was not anxious about them, and was no longer responsible. He was hungry and thirsty, and wondered whether they would ever give him all he wanted to eat and drink. He stretched and yawned, then lay back for a while listening to the whirr of the clipping machines, the mingling voices of men and the buzzing of flies in the roof over his head. He felt, as he lay there, a vague sort of satisfaction that he had brought them all safe from Nallagoo; he had followed the track for twenty-four miles across the desert, it had been hard work, but he had come through to his destination, as he knew he would; the men had praised him. Then he remembered that his

mother was dead, dead in the same way that an animal becomes dead when you hit it on the head with a stick. That was a strange thought, remote, yet somehow intimate and familiar. He too would be dead like that one day. In his sleepy condition the idea did not seem disturbing. He must have slept again, for when he was next conscious, he was aware chiefly of his hunger and of a man standing at a few yards distant looking at him. Martin lay still and stared back.

He was a young man with light, curling beard and moustache; his neck, face and arms were tanned to a dark brown, contrasting pleasantly with a grease-stained, blue vest which covered his breast. His trousers were made of the same blue material, also stained darkly with the grease from the fleeces. His eyes were a lighter blue, like that of the sky in the early morning. The red-brown tan made them seem very light and clear. He smiled and said slowly: "Have you had your sleep out yet, eh?"

The boy did not answer at once.

"I guess you'd like something to eat?"

"Oh yes, I would."

"We are having our tea in a little while; your sister is awake and she's coming. You had better come along too."

Martin liked this man; he liked his blue eyes, his brown skin, his curly beard and his slow manner of speech. "Where's my father?" he asked.

"He's gone to Nallagoo, but he'll be back tomorrow or the next day, I expect. He's gone to bury your mother," the man added with a simple though not unkindly frankness.

"Where's Patrick and baby and Mary?"

"Mary is not far off; she's all right. She's a favourite. Your father took the others over to Mrs. Allen's. He took them over in the pram. We could all see that he was not such a man at pushing a pram as you are," he added with a smile. "You need not worry about them; they are all right."

Martin stared silently. He was confirming his first impression; he liked this man. There were a few people with whom he might compare him, but certainly he seemed nicer than his father. "What's your name?" he asked, his gaze direct and unshifting.

The man sustained the interrogation of that look with the same serious directness. "Alec Shaw," he answered.

Martin stood up and stretched himself, then he followed Alec out into the open. A number of men were gathering round the long, white tables where the evening meal was being prepared. The smoke from several fires was being blown to and fro. Mixed with the smoke there was a strong smell of roasting mutton, and the sizzling of fat came as a welcome sound.

At the evening meal, which consisted of large quantities of roast mutton, strong tea and damper and jam, there were gathered between thirty and forty men. They were all clad in the same simple form of garments as was Alec, dungarees with low-cut shirt or vest with sleeves rolled back. Many of them were bearded, though with some it was evident that they still kept the habit of shaving once a week. They were all stained with, and smelt strongly of the grease from the fleeces. There was also a pervading odour of creosote. Many of the men had blood-stains and tar-stains upon their hands and sun-burnt arms. They

sat on opposite sides of the long plank tables, and ate ravenously and largely. Martin sat next to Alec Shaw, into whose charge, so he understood, his father had given him. He was awed and was naturally silent in the presence of so many rough-looking strangers. The boy had never seen so many men together before. Sometimes at Nallagoo he would see a passing drover, or shepherds from the nearer stations, but this present scene was something that seemed very imposing and grand. This crowd of rough men, all so intent upon their food gave him a pleasurable excitement, for he could feel that they were kindly disposed towards him.

After the meal they grouped about the fires, which were made up into blazing masses of wood with leaping flames. Martin had to answer questions, and he very soon found, when he began to talk, that he was no longer shy. These strangers, who as soon as he spoke to them seemed to be no longer strangers, were men of a common experience with himself. They knew the bush intimately; for years it had formed the background and substance of their life, just as it had of his own. And now he felt that his adventure, and the successful issue of that adventure, had raised him to be one among their fellowship. Their language, which had seemed strange at first, now became familiar. It was the language of the bush, seeming to spring spontaneously from the dry soil, and if one sanguinary adjective found a place amongst every few words, that also seemed as it should. Of such is the vigorous and emphatic language of the bush, and if throughout this story I fail to transcribe the true vernacular, it is because I lack courage to place the

simple and unconscious expression of men and pioneers beside the language of old Europe, which in comparison would seem tired and anæmic.

They sat late into the twilight. Upon the fire, logs were continually thrown, the flames blazed up, lighting the ring of faces. Martin, in spite of his long rest, was sleepy, he could not help yawning.

"I see you are still sleepy, lad," said Alec.

"Yes, sleepy," said Martin, looking up and rubbing his eyes, then framing for the first time the word which seemed so popular and so universal in its application, he added with a blush of self-consciousness: "bloody sleepy."

II

When Barclay had received the news of his wife's death, his first emotions were not predominantly those of regret at the loss of his mate and life partner, but the blow which struck him down was rather a vivid recognition that this was the master-stroke of ill-fortune, and like the others which had preceded, unexpected and undeserved. At that moment he felt that the malignant forces ranged against him had been revealed; in that wide comprehension there was fury, pain and an utter impotence in the face of unseen enemies. The business of life was unfair; why should he in particular be persecuted like this? He had worked as hard as any man could work—harder. Life had a grudge against him; he attracted misfortune, and now everything was gone. With his wife no longer alive, what could he do with the children? He would have to sell the house and the remaining few acres, all his labour was lost.

After his fall, for which he cursed in himself the power of nervous vitality which had occasioned that convulsion, and which appeared as weakness, he sat sulky and silent, his face hidden in his hands. It was his instinct to shut out all sight of immediate surroundings from the rage and resentment that filled his heart. The gloomy contest lasted for more than an hour. At length he raised his head; he must now at last after the long struggle of so many years, face and admit his failure, he must go through the necessary routine:—the burial of his wife, the sale of his land. And while these thoughts moved over the surface of his mind, other, deeper, less easily decipherable emotions surged and ebbed from unknown sources. . . . So she was out of his power at last; she had escaped from him. He dimly felt that she had been glad to go. She had never had his interests very loyally at heart; she had tricked him, she who had seemed to submit so mildly. His resentment warmed against her. As for the children, he would do his duty, but they would have to wait awhile. He would do his duty, he had always tried to do his duty. He looked up and saw them lying upon the fleeces, and an impulse came to question them further. He walked near to where they lay and stood eyeing them for a few seconds. Then changing his mind, and, as if exasperated with the sight, he turned and walked away.

The next morning he left for Tharameka, and from thence rode out to Nallagoo with doctor and parson that his wife's death might be registered and her body buried according to custom. Barclay himself dug the grave, placed the body within, and stood beside it the only mourner, while the parson read the service. He

then locked up the house, which was to be his home no longer, and rode away. The decisions which he had taken as to the future were few and simple. He would go south with his children, and would make arrangements for them to be boarded at some farm where they could be looked after by the farmer's wife. Mrs. Allen, the woman with whom they were now staying, could probably help him in this matter. Once free from that responsibility, he would be better able to settle his own fate.

On the third morning after Martin had arrived at the sheds, Barclay rode back into camp, and although he had been in the saddle most of the previous night, he went straight back to his place in the line of shearers. Work was a good anodyne, it had helped him through other troubles before now.

III

The realization of the change which had come upon his life came slowly to Martin. Sometimes he felt a sudden poignant stab that he would see his mother's face no more, yet it was difficult for him to believe that this was in reality a *permanent* loss. It was in the evenings, before going to sleep and in the mornings, that he realized in a dreamy way that she had been buried, and was for ever separated from that old life of continuous washing and cooking in which he had always seen her employed. His emotions then were half pleasant and half sad; they carried him beyond the range of previous experience. During the day, he thought little about her or of his past life. His child's consciousness, and indeed the whole of his vitality, had been put to so severe a strain, that now,

in the luxury of convalescence, he was content to hear only the happy, whispered confidence of returning life. The usual scenes, all the incidents of the camp, the multitude of sheep, the sound of their bleatings which seemed to form an invisible portion of the atmosphere, the sharp barking of dogs, the flowing of sheep from one pen to another, the arrival of fresh flocks, the shouted greetings of the shepherds, the oaths and the blasphemies, the whirr of the clip-pers, the sagging swish of the machine belts, and the sweating, strong-smelling bodies of the men, all these things filled the boy with interest and curiosity. And besides all these external things there was the consciousness of new personal relations. The men of the camp, however rough and indifferent they might be towards each other, were all friendly towards the boy. That he had successfully accomplished the task set him by a hard and unmouldable fact placed him high in their estimation. Martin felt their friendship, though he was unaware either of the simplicity of its source or the depth of its intention. Its virtue was not lost, and, as the days passed, he knew that the wide fellowship of the bush was his for now and for all time.

In particular he liked Alec Shaw. More than once when his day's work was finished, Alec had invited the boy to come on hunting expeditions into the bush. The pretext of these walks was the capture of rabbits, which were to be found hiding in the hollow stems of dead trees, but both man and boy found in the cool fragrance of the evening a larger recompense, which, while opening upon the mystery of the universal life of the earth, filled their hearts with

unreflecting happiness. Shaw was the first man with whom Martin had ever talked. With his father he had always been embarrassed, always a little ill at ease, not able to forget the sense of something unrestful and overbearing. This new friendship was different. With Alec he could talk as easily as with his sister, and with more interest. He was now no longer the leader, and found it pleasant to wait upon the will of another, to learn, and to snatch, with that acid hunger of youth, the crumbs of knowledge which his friend let drop. Alec knew all the animals that lived in the bush; he knew too the names of the birds, their calls and their flight. There were odd things that Alec could do, things quite below the notice of the ordinary bushman. He could catch the quick-running lizards, that Martin had never been able to catch, with a piece of horsehair on the end of a stick. He knew in what trees to find bardi-grubs, and how to tickle them out with a barbed grass-stem. With one part of his nature alone had he grown to manhood. He had plenty of sound sense as regards the business of life, but he retained the naïvety of a boy, and a boy's wide simplicity.

Often during the day when time was heavy upon his hands, Martin would lean against one of the up-rights of the shed watching Alec at work. He liked to see the sure way in which his friend could handle the sheep. He liked to watch the rapidly vibrating clippers eat their way under the wool, and see the white underside of the fleece turned back and peeled away from the shorn body. He admired the skill with which the shearers could bring away the fleeces close-matted and entire. Sometimes he would watch

his father at work. His father was a quicker, more experienced worker than Alec, but rougher with the sheep, nervous and quick in his movements. He worked either in silence or muttering to himself, and never spoke to the boy who stood watching.

Although several days had passed since Barclay's return, father and son had had no conversation upon the intimate affairs that were between them. Barclay had asked no questions; he had grasped the one cardinal fact of his wife's death, and had taken everything else for granted. Each evening he would go to that part of the long shed where Martin slept. He would give his son a rough kiss as if half ashamed; yet he was glad of the contact offered by this conventional action; he was willing to come nearer, but unable. Martin would feel his long, drooping moustache brush his cheek, then his father would walk away without saying anything beyond: "Good night, my boy," or "Good night, lad." This silence gendered in Martin a feeling of apprehension, for he had heard indirectly that the house at Nallagoo was to be sold. Sometimes he would speculate as to what would happen, but it did not enter his mind that he might be taken away from this region whose very arid aloofness had touched his heart and his imagination. When at length Barclay spoke of his intentions towards his children, Martin was numb under the blow. He hardly answered; his thoughts indeed were not articulate.

It was one afternoon that Barclay called Martin to him. They walked for a short distance out of the camp. Barclay sat down upon a pile of hurdles

as if tired, and the boy stood opposite. He looked at his son in silence for a short while, then he said, speaking slowly as if weighing his words, "I have wanted to speak to you." He paused, and Martin looked at the redness of his eyes and the deepness of the lines upon his face. "You did well, you and Mary, to bring the kids safe from Nallagoo when your mother died. The men here, and all who come to know of it, think well of you." Again he paused and looked fiercely down at the ground. Then taking his thought in another place: "Now your mother is dead, you children can't live here without the care of a woman. I must sell Nallagoo, let the old home go." He frowned and repeated: "You children can't stay here without the care of a woman, besides you must get some schooling before it's too late. I shall take you to Perth and get things settled. I can still pay for your keep, I am not so done as all that. I shall come back here and work. I can work," he added.

Martin's lips were dry; he was striving to understand the import of these words. Was he going to be taken away from the riches of this new-discovered life and left in a town? Was there to be a repetition of the dimly remembered lodgings, far from the bush? "Couldn't I stay with you, father," he suggested. "I could be of use to you? I can work quite a lot now, and I shall soon grow stronger."

Barclay looked fixedly at his son. His look was not unkindly when he spoke. "I shall be no longer my own boss, shall be working for others, couldn't keep you with me. No, you must go with the others," he said. "I'd be no fit company for a boy."

"Couldn't I . . ." but Martin dared not continue. Barclay had stood up. He looked down at the lad and frowned.

In that frown Martin saw the aspect of the fate which threatened him. There was no getting round it; he knew his father too well. His heart was flooded with the sudden, impotent misery of childhood. "When do you start?" he asked.

"Not tomorrow but the day after. We must be off early to catch the train from Tharameka. Tomorrow I'm going to Nallagoo to clear out the house and to get the clothes and things that you will want. You can come too if you like." His father's eyes were on him fixedly and sadly. "Would you like to come?"

Martin shook his head. His misery was so black upon him that he felt should he but speak one word he would be unable to hold back the tears.

Barclay misunderstood the boy's silence. He would like to have had his company on that journey, but if he was going to sulk, very well, let him. "Then you can bide here," he said, and turned and walked away.

Later that same day he rode over to Mrs. Allen's where the younger children were lodged. He sought for and found his daughter. He was going over to the old home, he told her. Would she come with him? With an intuition that Martin lacked, she understood his loneliness. Perhaps it was the first promptings of maternal pity that she felt. She caught at his rough work-stained hand. Yes, she would come with him. And was Martin coming? No, Martin would stay behind at the camp.

IV

For a long time that night, Martin lay awake thinking. If this change had happened before his mother's death, before the long march across the desert, he could have borne it; but now there was a difference. Something to which he could give no name had come to life. It was within himself, a strange and yet familiar being. It would not let him rest. It was a rebel, filling him with longing which was inarticulate and which made tears surge up into his eyes. He gave way to sobs, then after he had sobbed awhile, he stood up, looked round at the sleeping men and went further out into the open. He lay down and looked up at the stars, listening to the faint night noises. He couldn't leave this. No, not yet, not yet! But as he lay looking up at the stars, he was slowly soothed, and it seemed as if some mild influence from the sky descended, lapping his body in rest so that he slept.

He woke with the first dawn, and with returning consciousness came the thought of the coming separation. There was a sharp sweetness in the air, hardly a sound. At a little distance he could see some of the men, wrapped in their blue blankets. They lay at odd angles, some of them arms thrown wide. The feeling of night was still in the air, a few stars shone out of the highest, darkest part of the sky. Mid-way to the horizon a single planet glowed from out a yellow twilight. His longing to be alone, out in the bush, was overmastering.

The boy made his way through the sleeping camp. On the outskirts he passed by the sheep-pens where

the sheep were herded in thousands, those which yesterday and the day before had been brought in, and those others, already shorn, which today would go back to their pastures. They were still and silent for the most part, though when they saw him, one or two began to bleat. He chose the track which led out towards the tall trees, the same track over which with so much labour he had come but a few days before. As the sun lifted clear of the horizon, he paused to look at the long purple shadows thrown by the mulga-bushes, dark and sharp on the golden ground. In the distance orange faded to yellow and yellow to mauve. The cloudless sky was green and pale blue, and Martin felt that on this morning, which was exactly like all other mornings that dawned in the bush, the earth had been made new and very marvellous. It was different from what it had been, and yet the same. There was a quality which, could he touch it with his whole body, his mind, and with every atom that there was to him, would solace all pains and troubles. It was akin to the effulgence of the sunrise. It was that quality which all the unconscious longing of his youth went out to seek. Somewhere, perhaps in the awakening glory of morning, in the cruel heat of mid-day, in the mild clemency of evening, in the mystery of night, it might be found, and when found, held, never to be relinquished. If he were faithful to that vague emotion, and how could he be otherwise than faithful, it would, perhaps, at last, enfold and lift him to the height of his desire.

Once he was away out of hail of the camp, he walked slowly, happy and at ease within himself.

This world of sunlight and desert dust was as it had always been; he did not forget that it was cruel and implacable. He had struggled painfully in the grip of the desert to the uttermost of his strength; they might easily have died. Now, because of that danger and that struggle, he knew vaguely yet surely that an idea had been born. There was a new exchange between himself and the outside world.

This fair-haired, big-headed, thin-limbed boy wandering alone in the bush might well seem an exception to the civilization of our time, yet he was typical of many others. He wore on his head no hat, and the thick mat of his hair was bleached on the top almost white by the sun. His scanty shirt was open at the neck, showing the smooth, brown skin of his chest and shoulders. At the first glance it was patent that he was one with his surroundings, but the strangest and most remarkable thing was that any boy of European parentage should, in a few years, have become so perfectly adapted to the life of an alien continent. He was one in colour and in spirit with the bush. Like a native he moved cautiously and silently, and if this was the only obvious resemblance he bore to those earlier inhabitants, it was because the white man in his blood contributed a different essence, which would be changed and metamorphosed in a different manner. There are many children of this stamp growing up in Australia; it is they who are the true inheritors of the land. Through them, the soil and the bush which they love will ultimately speak. They are the new lovers of an exceedingly old land; through them it shall become articulate, upon them it puts this claim

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and this demand. For generations perhaps they will remain silent; an alien soil is not easily interpreted, but if, like Martin, they are true children of the bush, the struggle towards a wider and expanding consciousness is within them, it does not flag, though death or madness may seem to dissipate the forces.

By mid-day he was far from the camp; he had strayed from the original track. The sun, now overhead, was blazing hot; occasional gusts, in narrow and erratic eddies, whirled past on random courses, lifting columns of dust high into the sky. Martin lay down to rest under the shadow of some bushes. He slept for more than two hours and awoke refreshed. He was now hungry and thirsty and knew that he must return.

It was not difficult to follow back his own track; he started at a slow trot. Already he possessed the sense of direction which comes to men who are born and brought up in the bush. It did not seem to him at all probable that he should lose his way, though there were no land-marks to distinguish one area from another. He did not rely upon land-marks but upon an unconscious sense of direction. In his wandering that morning, he had strayed further from the camp than he had realized, and it was near sunset when he saw the tall trees which marked the approach to the sheds. As he drew near he was hailed by a shout, and Alec Shaw stepped out from the near undergrowth. The man looked at him with the same amused smile as at their first meeting. "Where have you been to?"

"Just knocking about."

Now that Martin was no longer alone, the dread of

his departure, which all day he had been holding at arm's length, came suddenly upon him.

"Your father was asking for you this morning. He wondered where you might be," said Alec.

"Was he angry that he couldn't find me?"

"No, but he seemed anxious to see you before he started for Nallagoo. He took your sister along."

Martin frowned; he didn't want even to speak of his departure, it was so hateful. He looked down at his feet and kicked at the dust. "He says he's going to take us all down south tomorrow, and leave us behind in some bloody place to go to school. I wish mother hadn't died."

"Ay, he told me he was taking you. . . . It's natural enough. . . . I see you don't exactly cotton to the idea."

"No." Martin looked up and his frown became deeper. "I shall hate it. I want him to let me stay and work with him. I could be of use. I can ride after cattle; I'm not afraid of them, and I can see sheep when they are far off better than he can."

"That I can believe." Then after a pause, "Why don't you want to go?"

"I want to stay here. I like it here."

"That's a good reason, but it won't carry far with your father." Alec seemed half serious and half amused. "He's right to want to send you to school. You don't want to grow up into a wild bush-groper."

"I wouldn't care," said the boy. "Why not?"

"Would you want to stay behind if your sister and your brothers went south?"

"I don't want to leave them, but if they must go, well I'd like to stay."

"What is it makes you so keen?"

"I dunno."

"You'd stay here all alone if you could?"

"Yes."

They walked in silence for some distance. Alec was thinking, why shouldn't he take the boy to work with him? That is, if his father agreed. There were points against the scheme, but were they so important? The idea wasn't quite new to him, he had thought of it earlier and put it by. Now, if anything was to be done, he must make up his mind. He put his hand on Martin's shoulder. "See here, Martin," he spoke slowly, almost casually. "It's your father who must settle this turn, but if you'd like to stay on and come over to my place, I'll ask him. I've got some land, as I told you, not far from here; and there's a school you could ride to three or four days every week. When you weren't at school you could make yourself useful with the stock. It's a lonely place, no proper house like you've been used to; perhaps you wouldn't mind that. I'd be glad of your company."

Martin stood still and looked up at Alec with eyes wide open and questioning as he took in the importance of this idea. This offered an indefinite reprieve. A sense of elation mingled with relief rose upward from his heart. "I should like to come," he said slowly. Then with a sudden outburst and seizing Alec's hand: "Oh, do ask him; ask him tonight."

Alec looked down at the eager face, his expression was half quizzing, half kindly and wholly non-committal. "Maybe he'll be glad to have you off his hands," he said slowly.

V

Not till late that evening did Barclay return to camp, and though Martin had resolved to lie awake for his father's return, the hard exercise of the day, followed by a heavy meal was too much for his resolution, he was fast asleep. Alec had kept one of the fires blazing, and when Barclay had fed, he gave a rough outline of his scheme. At first Barclay had resented anything that seemed like an interference with his plans, but after a while he came to see that there might be an advantage in having one less mouth to provide for. It might be easier to arrange for a girl and two baby boys than it would be for a family enlarged by the presence of Martin. Why not let him stay? Shaw had the reputation of being a straight fellow, and if he could be sure that the boy went regularly to school, why should he object? So long as he himself worked in the neighbourhood, he would be able to ride over from time to time and see his son. After an hour's conversation, the plan no longer seemed antagonistic. It commended itself; Barclay was pleased. He spoke of Martin, praising his quickness and keenness of sight. He believed that the lad would be worth his keep.

It was Barclay who, the next morning, told Martin the news. His explanation was heavy-handed and boring; he spoke of school and hard work. Martin seemed silent and composed, but in reality his relief and happiness were great. So long as he might remain, nothing mattered.

Yet, when later in the day, it came to saying good-bye to Mary and his two brothers, his feelings were

not so simple; his eyes filled with tears. He had seen little of the younger children since the arrival at the camp, when their sun-blistered faces had looked sick and suffering. Now they were well and strong again. Toward them he felt the stirring of a new kind of right. They were his brothers, they had been dependent upon him, and he had saved their lives. He did not want them to be taken away. Mary was crying because he was not going south; he could not promise even that he would ever see her again. This was indeed the break-up of the home. Now at last he understood that his mother was dead. There was not much to say. He kissed them and shook his head to shake the tears away; yet all the time, he knew that he was glad to be staying behind.

This mingling of pain and happiness was strange and terrible. Yet it was but the first tribute which human sympathy and affection pays to those compelling forces which seemingly come from beyond the limits of personality, but which have their origin and their fate within the very essence of the self.

Chapter 5: *Seven Gums*

I

S EVEN white gum-trees marked the site of the diminutive shack which served as base for Alec's activities. Had it not been for these trees, it would have been easy to miss a building so small and so dust-coloured. It was the merest hut, fourteen feet by twelve, with eaves five feet high, of wooden uprights and beams, with stretched hessian walls. It had been painted with thick white paint, but the dust had settled upon it before it had dried, and it was the same colour as the surrounding plain. The roof was of corrugated iron.

As for the first time he approached, Martin viewed it with a good deal of curiosity. It was so much smaller than Nallagoo. It was like a toy house, and to live in it would be like playing at some game, a game which had become real life. The country in this part of the bush was much barer than the country round Nallagoo, and Martin was sorry to miss the green undergrowth of acacias and reminder-bushes. With the exception of the trees near the hut, the vegetation was all stunted, set far apart with large spaces of decaying granite between.

During the weeks that Shaw had remained at the shearing shed, Martin had speculated as to the kind of place which would be his new home. He had made

pictures in his mind of the house and of the landscape. The reality was different from any of the imaginings, it was far smaller and more primitive. The landscape was also different and somewhat remarkable. About two hundred yards behind the hut was a cliff twenty feet in height. In one direction it continued as far as the eye could see, in the other it gradually subsided to the level of the plain. This formation, which he later found to be common in the region, was called by the bushmen a breakway; was formed by a huge crack in the underlying rock, on one side of which the ground had sunk, leaving the two levels divided by a sheer cliff. A striking feature, imparting a somewhat sombre character, and Martin noted that, should he ever be uncertain of his whereabouts, it would offer a valuable land-mark which would lead him back with certainty to the clump of white gum-trees.

"It's a hard country this," said Alec as their horses' hoofs drummed on the bare, decaying rock.

"Not much feed," said the boy, looking at the stunted bushes.

"That's so, but further north there's plenty of salt-bush. I have to camp here," he added in explanation. "There is no other good drinking water."

After they had dismounted, unsaddled and hobbled their horses, Shaw looked round critically. "Everything seems in order," he said in tones of satisfaction. To Martin there seemed little that could be out of order. At the foot of one of the trees there was a well-head covered by some planks, and surrounded by a fence of barbed-wire; there were some half-charred logs and a charred patch upon the ground where fires

had burnt. These were the only distinctive features. The trees with their white and pale-green stems seemed pleasant and friendly enough.

"You better tie up the dogs," said Alec. "I don't want them fossicking about. Fix the chains where the staples are in the tree yonder."

Martin called to the dogs: two wild-seeming creatures, half lurcher and half collie and his own dog, the puppy he had brought from Nallagoo.

"Well, what do you think of it?"

"It's all right."

"Is it a bit too wild for you?"

"No." The boy shook his head slowly.

"That's a good thing," said Alec, watching him with his candid, blue eyes. "I hope it will suit you as well as it suits me. The air smells right enough, eh?"

Martin nodded and smiled.

Inside the hut prevailed an extreme orderliness. This was perhaps necessary as the single room was full of materials of all kinds; so full that it seemed quite impossible for any one to live inside the walls. In one corner was a mattress with blankets. There were two tables and two chairs, a wash-stand with basins and pitcher; several pairs of boots stood in a row opposite the door. Shepherd's crooks and various tools hung upon, or were propped against the walls. Also hanging upon the walls was a gun and a rifle and several stock-whips. In one corner were cooking utensils, and close beside them a large box on which were two spare saddles. This box Martin later found contained tinned food of diverse kinds. From the centre beam of the roof were suspended bags of flour, that the ants might not so easily get at them. Over

the single window, which was very small, a green blind was drawn.

The first occupation was to get tables, chairs, cooking-utensils, food-boxes, etc., out into the open. These were arranged on the bare space under the trees, and those which could be hung up were hung upon the lower branches.

"There's more room to stretch here," said Alec, smiling at the accomplished task. "Do you know how to cook? I'll teach you before long how to cook a dinner for a man who's hungry and been riding in the bush all day."

But that evening Alec cooked the dinner; Martin drew water from the well and gave the dogs and the horses their food and their drink. After the meal, Alec made up the fire and the two companions sat talking for a while. When the last twilight had left the sky and stars were bright overhead, Alec went to the hut but appeared again in a few moments with his arms full of blankets. "We sleep on the ground here. It's better on the ground than in bed . . . when you are used to it. Use your boots as a pillow. They make a good pillow," he added. "Here's where I lie. You can choose your own plot; there's plenty of room." Martin hesitated for a moment whether to lie under the trees or out in the open; he compromised by choosing a place under the outermost branches. He lay down, wrapped his blanket about him and gazed upward. Far away in the black spaces between the ends of the branches he saw the winking of stars. He felt the simple reality of his existence; but how small and insignificant was his life. He was a tiny creature upon the immense plain under the limit-

less sky. As he gazed upward he felt lonely; he was far from his sister and his brothers, very far too from his dead mother, whom he now remembered with longing. In the camp by the sheds, he had not felt like this; here in the desert it was different. Should he move his position a little nearer to Alec? But this he was ashamed to do. He lay still, gazing upwards, thinking. With his hands he touched the fine, powdery dust; he raised them to his face, passed them downward over his chest, his loins, to his knees. Again he raised them to his face. This small body which was himself, it was strange. He looked up again, and could see the outlines of the tapering, lanceolate leaves, which stood out in black silhouette against the sky. In all the surrounding country there was a hush, which if not a complete silence, was a silence made tangible by gentle sounds and stirrings. There was the movement of some little animal by the tree stems, there was the faint clink and rasp of a dog's chain, and now and then there were small crackling sounds as flakes from the cooling, contracting rocks broke off and crumbled. His body was very sensitive. Mind and body were one; he knew only his body, and through his body he was aware of the great distances, north, south, east and west, that in faint undulations and level plains lay dumb yet expectant under the covering of night. The near presence of the breakaway, with its bare abrupt cliff, seemed, for a time, to be threatening him. He could not sleep, but lay listening to those occasional, yet oft repeated sounds, rustlings and whisperings, that the faint air wafted.

The moon slowly climbed the sky, she rose from a misty region near the horizon. The quality of the

darkness was changed. How cold and white the moon looked misshapen and waning. By her light Martin could see the sharp line of the breakaway, casting its black shadow, definite and hard. It was threatening, and somehow gave the impression of cruelty. It seemed to be advancing across the desert from far distance. Martin, awed by so august a contrast of light and shadow, lifted himself on his elbow and looked round. He heard the rattle of a chain and a low whine, and knew that he was not the only one lying awake troubled by the great loneliness of that spot. The puppy gave a louder whine and the chain rattled again. The boy sat upright now. Was Alec awake? No, he was asleep long ago. He rose to his feet, walked quickly to the dog, unloosed him and returned to his blanket. The puppy, glad of human company, curled down beside him. A few moments later they were asleep, the dog lying encircled by the boy's arm.

II

In the bright sunlight of morning, the fancies of night faded far distant. Alec and Martin rose with the sun. As soon as they had breakfasted, they caught and unhobbled the horses. To saddle them was a task soon accomplished; a few moments later they were cantering across the plain.

"I'm going across to see George Edmunsen," Alec announced. "He's been in charge of my place while I've been away. I've done as much for him at times. He's a good fellow, a bit odd, you'll see. It's a good many miles to his place, so keep your horse at slow, regular pace."

It was not Shaw's habit to talk much. Both man and boy rode in silence, thinking their own thoughts. Once when they had been riding for nearly an hour, Shaw remarked: "Your girth's a bit loose."

Martin dismounted, tightened his girth, tugging at the straps with his teeth, then mounted again and rode after his friend.

They found Edmunsen at a little distance from his house. He was engaged in overhauling a large flock, and, with the aid of some native boys, driving them in single file from one pen to another. He stood watching the sheep as they ran past, and was quick to stop any animal that he wanted to handle. He was tall, fair-haired, with a darkish red complexion. When he looked at one, his eyes appeared to be gazing beyond, yet they were quick to notice details. He greeted Shaw with no articulate words but with a kind of cough and waited for the other to speak.

Alec dismounted, stepped over the hurdle and stood among the sheep. "Things all right?" he asked.

Edmunsen grabbed at a sheep, held it struggling and swore. "The bloody thorns get into my hands," he said. "The wool's just full of thorns . . . makes the flesh fester." He glanced up for a moment. "I'll finish this lot," he said. Alec waited, and the line of sheep flowed on slowly, irregularly.

Later they talked of their business, and Martin stood by holding the horses. He noticed that often when he expected Edmunsen to speak, there would be a recurrence of the strange inarticulate sound. It was effective in its way although ambiguous. Edmunsen had looked at him for some seconds but had made no allusion to his presence.

"Do the new pumps for the wells come up to promise?" asked Alec.

"Not bad. You chose the right sort."

"The water from the new well from the clay-pan, is that as salt as ever?"

Edmunsen gave his cough. Alec looked a little uncertain as to its meaning, but didn't press the subject. "There was an overlander here last week buying lambs. I sold him four hundred culls from your number two flock."

"What price?"

"Nine and six." He meant nine and six per head. "I had to make a stand for the last three pence." Edmunsen spoke slowly, he was proud of his deal. "He started at eight and nine." His face relaxed for a moment from its somewhat expressionless mask, and a glimmer of amusement played about his eyes and the corners of his mouth. "I worked him up to nine and three. . . . He swore he wouldn't give another farthing. . . . Called the deal off, but I got the price."

"They are worth it," said Alec.

Again Edmunsen coughed. "He'll lose a lot before he gets them down south."

"He'll strip the butchers at the other end. I know these fellows, they are pretty smart on the profits."

"They need to be," commented Edmunsen with a certain note of satisfaction.

The two men talked for a while longer, then as a hint that he had said all that need be said, Edmunsen gave a sign for the stream of sheep to be continued.

Alec walked to his horse and prepared to mount.

The question was growled over the shoulder with-

out troubling to turn. "Who's the boy?" Edmunsen asked.

"He's Martin O'Brien," said Alec as he swung into the saddle. "He's come to live at Seven Trees."

"Uugh!" exclaimed Edmunsen. His cough turned into an oath as he pricked his hand on a thorn in the fleece that he had just grasped. He made no other comment. Martin felt very small and unimportant in the eyes of this tall Saxon.

"He's a good fellow; one of the straightest men," Alec said as they rode away. "If ever you are in trouble, you can depend on him to help. If he says he'll do a thing, well, he'll do it. He's not a man to waste words, nor a man to get very friendly with either," he added.

By noon they had covered about half the extent of Alec's holding. Twice they had stopped to mend fences, and Martin had been able to show that he knew something about such work. He showed too that he had a quick eye for spotting sheep in the heat-shimmering mist of the distance.

For their mid-day meal they rested in the shadow of a small hut. Close beside them one of Alec's new wind-mills ground and wrenched at its pump as the wind drove the clanking iron sails. Here was abundance of water for themselves and their horses. After the meal they dozed for a while in spite of the withering heat.

In the afternoon Martin encountered a more strenuous and exciting task than any that the morning had suggested. On their way homeward they sighted a mob of cattle. Alec wanted to get close up that he might count them and examine their condition. The

cattle of the bush run practically wild over large enclosures, many miles in extent. From the time that the calf is branded it often has no intercourse with men till the time it is driven in to be killed. They are wild creatures, moving over the bush in big mobs, dangerous to meet on foot. As the horsemen drew near, the steers, with much snorting and whisking of their tails, moved off. Alec nodded to Martin. "Ride up on the left . . . not too much of a hurry. . . . Keep to the flank . . . don't let them come back on you. Can you use your whip?" Martin wasn't quite sure that he could use his whip to the best advantage. He raised himself in the stirrups and let the long lash fly out. It cracked very satisfactorily that time. His horse jumped sideways alarmed at the sudden sound. He wished he could always be sure of a good pistol-shot crack like that. "I shall keep on the right," Alec continued. "There's a corner in the fence about a mile further on; I shall turn them into that. Keep well back and don't rush on any account."

Martin set his teeth. This was man's work and he rejoiced in the fine horse he had under him, a far finer animal than the pony that he used to ride. He started at a slow canter, keeping well out on the left. Imperceptibly the pace increased. The thudding hoofs of the mob made the earth shake, and communicated a thrill of excitement to both men and horses. The big waler shook his head and pulled at the bit. Martin tugged at the reins with all his boy's strength. The horse was pulling in towards the centre. He must hold him out on the flank, he knew that. His teeth gritted together, and how his arms

ached. Now Alec was galloping on the right flank to turn them. Martin could hear the loud reports of his whip. They were wheeling. God damn the brute, he must stop him; his arms were being pulled out. He was too close. Alec's voice rang out. Oh, he knew his mistake, no need to shout. He was too far in, but how could he help it? Yes, it was his fault; he couldn't ride, wasn't strong enough, that was what was the matter. They were wheeling right round, some of them were bunching, uncertain, but the movement was back. He couldn't let them get away like that. He must turn them at all costs. He leant forward on to the mane, took hold near the bit and dragged the horse's head round. It was dangerous . . . he didn't mind. . . . It was just possible to stop them. . . . He'd do it if he could. With a sudden jerk of his heels he set the horse forward. At last the brute seemed to understand what was wanted. A short hard race, but he was there in time. He met the fierce-eyed, hard-breathing cattle while they were yet uncertain whether to charge back or go forward into the wide space between the wires. Alec had fallen back that there might be plenty of room. Martin swung his lash, cracking it again and again. Not loud cracks like that first . . . his arm was too tired for that. Still they weren't so bad. They might suffice. There were moments of suspense. Would they charge, sweeping away boy and horse in the stampede? They hesitated; unwilling to face the lash, they turned sullenly away.

"That's the style, well done. Now keep back, keep back, don't hustle them."

"Oh, my arms," gasped Martin. "He does pull."

Yet he was glad. There was praise in Alec's voice. He had turned them; he hadn't muddled it after all.

They kept their horses moving to and fro at some distance while Alec made his inspection. Martin watched the deeply-breathing cattle as they jostled one another, each pushing for himself with strong fore-shoulder and heavy head. The eye-lids drawn back from the bulging eyes exposed brown rims flecked with white and with red veins. These were fierce lives, very primitive in their fear. Something within the boy answered to this ancient quality. He liked seeing them and being near to them. It was a poignant emotion, part sympathy and part glory that he was different from them, and a man. He felt in a direct and physical way their potential strength. If he were on foot, they would trample him to death in a few moments. Yet in a mystical and incomprehensible sympathy he was at one with them, just as he was at one with the excited horse that pulled so at the reins, tossing his head and making the yellow foam fly up into his face. The presence of those large-fleshed, wild-eyed creatures, the rank stench of their hides, the curve of the sharp horns, the unconcern with which they staled and dunged, the life of the horse between his legs, the emanations of the bridled power that he could barely with all his strength control . . . all these, together with the blazing sun-rays, the hard earth that trembled under the hoofs, conveyed intimations of his own personality. It was deep. It contained all these. Like a bud, expanding toward the light, he drew his strength from out the dark, unknown earth. Behind the budding consciousness,

now passing from childhood to youth, was the mystery which was himself, about which he *knew* so little, yet half-apprehended much. Life was sweet in his mouth.

III

By the end of the day, they had made a general survey of the farm. Alec was well pleased. They turned their horses homeward and rode towards the setting sun. "Well, what do you think of it all?" he asked.

"My word, it's fine," said Martin and his voice rang with conviction. All that he had seen during the day:—the distant sheep-flocks, the herds of cattle, the well-kept fences, the new windmill pumps, gave an impression of well-being. Alec with his slow manner and sanguine, open gaze inspired confidence; he was bound to succeed.

A slow canter brought them, at the end of an hour, to the upper edge of the breakaway. The lower plain lay spread beneath them, with the blood-red arc of the sun sinking into a brown haze that rimmed the horizon. They followed along the cliff's edge for some distance, till in a little gully not far from the group of the white gum-trees, they came to a place where the rock had crumbled and the horses were able to descend. The hut showed a dark neutral tint against the fading light.

That night, the second night in his new home, which was the bare ground of the desert under the open sky, Martin curled himself in his blanket and lay down with a feeling of confidence. Action had dulled his imagination. He looked sleepily at the stars, and

felt well-satisfied at their remote glimmer. He was asleep long before the rising of the moon.

IV

The creek, which ran past the school-house, was a mere water-worn cleft in the midst of a gently undulating valley. In the spring-time when the rains fell, a stream formed, and at the lower end where the banks were no longer steep, there was a shallow pond. This pond, during the short weeks of its duration, was alive with frogs and with all manner of water insects. On the sides of the creek grew more trees and undergrowth than were to be found anywhere nearer than the Gascoign River. The school-house stood on a small rising, though the garden in front, owned and tended by a Chinaman, was traversed by the stream. Two salmon-gums raised their fan-like branches over the building. They offered a clear land-mark from a distance, and the settlement was called after them. There were twelve other houses in the settlement and a store, a few huts and some tents, also, at certain periods of the year, a native camp. The pupils that attended this bush school came, for the most part, from outlying stations, and would ride in each day on horse-back. Sometimes as many as three children would come riding on one horse.

Martin had liked his first view of the school. He liked the open spaciousness of the low building, and the deep, cool-looking verandah. The tall gum-trees were also pleasant and the unusual creepers that partially covered the house. He felt sure that up the creek amongst that thick undergrowth there must live many animals, kangaroos, wallabies, bandicoots, lizards and

snakes and birds of many kinds to be stalked, watched and perhaps hunted. That first time, Alec had come with him to see the school-master and make arrangements for his education. The interview did not last long. The school-master, a tall man with a beard, and with what seemed to Martin a curiously pink face, listened to what Alec had to say; he asked Martin a few questions, and the affair was settled. Martin was to attend school four days a week. For the other three days, and during holidays, he would be free to help Alec with work on the station.

The first day at school passed like an interesting adventure. In the intervals between classes, at lunch-time and when work was over for the day, he made acquaintance with the other boys and girls. Half-consciously he made comparison between himself and these others, just as he compared his horse with the other horses that waited hobbled on the compound. It was easy to talk with the boys who had lived and been brought up in the same conditions as himself. They had the same interests, much the same standard of ideas, and, for the most part, the same physical abilities. When, in the evening, he rode home he carried with him a satisfactory impression of the new life. This was better than hanging around at the old homestead. No doubt he had been happy enough then, but that life would content him no longer. How glad he was he had not been sent south. For three days a week he was working for his keep; he would be worth more than that. Already he felt the first flush of manhood and power.

By the end of the first fortnight he had found his place, not only in the school but amongst the larger

community of Gum-tree Creek. He knew how much attention and respect he must give to Tom Adams, the school-master, and how much to Miss Lucy Hartland, who was assistant teacher. He quite definitely liked Lucy, partly because she was young with grey eyes and abundant soft hair, and partly for reasons he did not analyse. All the children liked her, they rather feared her too, for she knew how to keep order better than Tom Adams, who was handicapped by a natural slowness of nature. But of all the people at the creek, Martin found the store-keeper the most remarkable, and, in some strange way, the most attractive. Evans was a small, dark Welshman. How long he had been in the colony no one at Gum-tree Creek knew; he was not given to talking about himself. He was small-limbed with a somewhat furtive manner, and with a reputation of being not too honest. Living, as he did, at this time, an almost entirely sensory life, Martin would have found it difficult to account for his interest in this man. It was perhaps a certain animal quality which the man possessed; it was both attractive and repulsive. The boy's eyes would follow him, wondering about him, and conscious that he was different from other people. Evans was not liked in the settlement, yet he was given a certain grudging respect. For so young a man his face was remarkable. It looked too old for his young body, much lined with an odd twist to one side. In his dark eyes there was a look of furtive evasion, and sometimes Martin felt with a thrill of excitement that the store-keeper possessed hidden and secret powers. When the children went to the store to buy sweets, they did so with a feeling of adventure. They were silent under that

sharp, rapid scrutiny, yet they were glad when Evans spoke to them, and would have lingered had they dared.

Some six months previously, he had been away to the coast to buy stock, and when he came back, he had brought with him a girl of eighteen. They had been married, so he said. She was a thin, scraggy girl, certainly not to be described as beautiful, yet like Evans she had the power of arresting attention. Jane, whose eyes and hair were even darker than her husband's, possessed at least one striking quality: her skin was of an exceptional whiteness and pallor. From the first she had been unpopular at the settlement, this was perhaps on account of her uncertain position and of her reticence. She was silent, almost morose, speaking little either to her husband or to any one else. Her voice when she did speak had a vibrant quality that was often disconcerting. With her black eyes she watched the people who came to the store. There was an aloofness and hostility in her expression. Martin disliked this silent criticism; he would redden beneath her gaze, and then in self-defence would look up only to meet those dark, slightly-contemptuous eyes and to look away again abashed. His glance would be attracted back again to her slim figure and to her face.

It was not for some weeks that they became definitely friends. The attraction, or whatever it was between them, was not one-sided; both man and wife seemed interested in the boy. Evans had dropped a casual invitation to come to the store in the lunch hour; at these times Jane would give him hot tea and additional jam for his bread. They talked of just

ordinary things, of the life in the bush, of the work he was doing, but through their conversation there ran a slightly disdainful tone towards the other people in the settlement, and indeed towards mankind in general. It was not by any words nor actions that Martin was troubled or excited, yet sometimes he was strangely moved by these people. There was a purely sensuous and elementary recognition, there was an affinity which was as it were an open door of the senses, a releasing of magnetic currents. They were different from any one else that he had met. Perhaps they were more alive; within him psychic elements thrilled in response.

Evans was a source of much information; he could talk with authority about horse-racing and prize-fighting. He had travelled in other lands; and Martin felt that wherever he had been he had always been in the main stream, always hungry for experience, and for life. He would speak casually of women and the tricks they had played him, and the boy would be aware of a latent agitation. Some element within him protested against this talk, yet he rejoiced. The look in the girl's eyes as she listened kindled a flame of excitement, which fluttered sometimes upon the edge of fear.

On the days that he remained at Seven Gums with Alec, he did not think much about the store-keeper and his wife. Their impression faded and was lost amid the life of action. On the station there was rough-riding in plenty and hard work. He was often given jobs that had to be accomplished in solitude. At such times it was easy to slide back into the recollections of childhood; so often he had been alone in the bush. And when, perhaps, standing motionless for a few moments

in the mid-day stillness, or cantering at evening with a light breeze on his face, he would feel that the values of living given to him by other people were small in comparison with the intangible essence which at such times he came near to possessing.

V

The routine of this new life, the alternating of school-time and the freedom of the bush was more satisfying than the earlier years at Nallagoo. Then, indeed, he had been free to wander, but his hours had lacked the relevance of action. Now, in the growing strength of his body and the half-conscious awakening of his mind he found a more satisfying harmony. . . . Yet not always harmony. There were times when longings broke with a recurrent insistence into his happiest moods. His young life, as yet but half aware of all the variety of its own sensuous perceptions, was disturbed by an ever-widening horizon. The manifestations of nature became, in the inarticulate religion of adolescence, symbols of God and of eternity. Yet at the same time, and with a contrary and disharmonious motion, self-consciousness was raised and tossed upon a restless sea. His individual being took its place in the present actuality of time, far from the calm of eternity; an inner life disturbed that earlier harmony, it was egotistical, restless and hungry.

At certain periods, growth comes with unexpected leaps, a new stage suddenly manifests itself and the whole surface of existence is altered. It was thus that Martin received the shock of awakening sex-consciousness. What caused it was a simple and inevitable

occurrence, a thing inherent in the process of life, but which seemed to him isolated and strange. As he continued to think about it, it became increasingly important.

He had returned from school, and Alec from his day's work. They were preparing their evening meal when a rider appeared upon the skyline, followed along the upper edge of the break-away, descended the gully and approached the camp. As the figure drew nearer, Martin was surprised to see that the stranger was a woman. She rode close up without giving any salutation. Only when she was within a few paces, she pulled up abruptly: "Hullo boy, who's your company?" She looked at Alec with a sign of slightly surprised amusement. Her voice was clear and rather deep.

Alec had watched, waiting for her to speak. He handed the frying-pan to Martin, and walked towards her. "Hullo Nance."

The girl who had been riding astride dismounted by flinging her leg over her horse's neck, kicking her left foot free from the stirrup and sliding to the ground. She stood looking inquiringly at Martin, then with a quick flash at Alec: "Who's the lad?"

Alec explained. While he was speaking, the girl continued to regard Martin. Once she looked at Alec and smiled as if she had not quite understood; she traced patterns negligently with the coiled lash of her whip in the loose dust. Martin felt embarrassed. He knew that he was blushing and could feel the criticism in her glance.

"You never told me," she said at length.

"No, I didn't."

"You might have told me."

"You know I'm not much of a one for writing."

She nodded, then suddenly she laughed, and her demeanour changed; she nodded to Martin and smiled.

"So you have been here all alone with him! What led you to do that? Now tell me the truth."

The question came so unexpectedly that Martin scarcely understood; he knew vaguely that he liked this girl and the bright colour of her sun-tanned face. She did not wait for an answer, but continued: "Have you got no father nor mother?"

"Mother's dead," said Martin, rather abashed. "Father's at work."

"Oh well . . . really . . ." she dismissed these facts as if they were not of importance. "Any brothers and sisters?" Martin told her. "So you like living in the bush? It's a wonderful place, eh? They say those who start young in the bush never get away from it. I'm like that, but lots of them go away to towns. Oh yes." After a moment's pause, since Martin remained silent: "Is Alec making a real bush-groper of you?"

"Yes," said Martin seriously.

She laughed and with another quick change of mood: "Take my horse, there's a good boy, give him some water. You needn't hobble him, he'll come when I call." She stretched out her arms and yawned. "Oh God, I'm hungry. Alec, give me a drink for Christ's sake." She drank deeply and handed him the cup to be refilled. "Ah, that's better."

When she had emptied it again, she sauntered away to a little distance, lay down and stretched at full length, gazing up into the sky.

How different women are from men, Martin thought. No man would behave quite like that; the other men wouldn't let him. Yet he felt that Alec thought no worse of her for this absence of restraint, nor did he think worse of her, but rather liked her the better. It gave him a strange pleasure to see her. She looked happy and free, lying on the ground with one arm flung out. No doubt she was tired from her ride, and was glad to rest. He wondered how far she had come. He watched her to see if she would move, but she lay quite still; her eyes were open and she looked up blankly and steadily.

While they ate their evening meal, Nance did most of the talking; she asked questions about the farm, and seemed to know pretty thoroughly the details of the routine. She talked to Martin of his mother and his earlier life. She heard the story of the trek from Nallagoo, and made the boy talk more than he had ever talked when alone with Alec. After the meal, they piled the fire high so that, out of the crackling blazing mass, flames leaped far higher than the hut and caused shadows from the trees to flicker against the sky. Conversation no longer flowed as before, but, as if hypnotized by the fire and the encircling quiet of the desert, they watched the hot impetuous life creep along the twigs, burst into jets of glowing flame, and crumble into charcoal and ashes. Their remarks became less frequent, and as the flames died down, the darkness, carrying with it a sense of the great magnitude of those plains, closed in, and imposed its silence. A flying-fox fluttered to and fro and round about over the tree tops, and Martin, looking back from following its motions, caught a glance of the girl's upturned

face, lit by the firelight. With sudden homage he knew that she possessed beauty and was desirable. She was like Jane Evans in that she was a woman, yet immensely different. He liked her better than he liked Jane; he felt instinctively that she was more to be trusted.

"It's time for you to turn in, lad," said Alec.

Martin took his blanket and went to his usual place, but he did not go to sleep. Something for which he could not account made him restless. His interest was centered with an almost passionate excitement upon the couple who remained seated by the fire. The flames had altogether died down, yet, in the glow from the ashes, he could see Alec and Nance sitting close together. Alec had his arm about her; Martin could hear, though could not distinguish, their whispered talk. Now and then Nance would laugh a gentle, sweet laugh, which gave him both pleasure and pain. He lay watching, his heart beating fast, his whole body electric. He saw their dark forms stand up. They walked toward the hut. At the door the girl paused; she looked round into the night. Martin could see that her hair was loosed and hung upon her shoulders. She looked up at the sky, then she entered the hut. The door closed and Martin was left alone.

As the minutes passed he felt chilled and unhappy. He lay still for a while, his hands clenched. For a long time he remained thus. Then because he could not sleep, he stood up and looked about him. The night was very still; the fire was almost out, a few embers only. The boy was disturbed by unseen forces. He was attracted towards the hut, yet was repelled from it. He felt both tender and angry. For

a while he had been perplexed, but now he knew. A knowledge had been revealed, the experience of former lives had come within the range of his consciousness. He could not bear the accumulating pressure of that experience, but turned and walked away into the surrounding dark. . . .

VI

The bright sunlight of morning did not quite banish the unquiet sensations of the night. At breakfast Martin would have been ill at ease had it not been for the simple and friendly bearing of his companions. He was ashamed of his consciousness of a sense of shame. Aware and for the first time resentful of his youth, he looked forward to being alone by himself. In solitude, the disquieting emotions might sink and become assimilated. His desires were, for the present, in contradictions. He wanted intimate comprehension, yet at the same time wished to keep this new knowledge at arms length.

Nance, who in the interest that she kindled, seemed more striking and more attractive than on the previous night, was very friendly towards the boy. Her expression of regret that he must go to school that day seemed genuine, and she suggested that on the following Saturday, when he should be free, they should go kangaroo hunting. Her occupation with the familiar things of his life made it easier for him to place her amidst the inner shifting of perspectives, yet when he was on his way to school and once more alone, surrounded on all sides by the familiar and feathery-branched mulgas, he was beguiled by far-wandering thoughts, which in their turn became merged

in emotions, hitherto unexperienced, uplifting and strange.

VII

The mood lasted throughout the day, but relaxation came when after school he wandered up the creek and sat down beside a tangle of green herbs which grew in the now dry bed of the stream. Usually at this time he would have mounted his horse and ridden with some of the other children a certain distance of his homeward journey. But today, with some half-formed intention of looking in upon Evans and his wife, he had started to walk towards the store. He had not entered, but had strayed further up the creek. And now he forgot his trouble, and was again happy with the unclouded happiness of childhood. The creatures that moved amongst the grass absorbed his attention. For how long he remained thus he did not know, but he was awakened from this serene unconcern by a sensation which warned him that he was being watched.

He looked up, and at a little distance, saw Jane Evans. She must have crept after him; for how long she had been watching he did not know, but he was filled at once with resentment. He had, too, a feeling that all this had happened to him before. It was like the ghost of a memory floating in upon his consciousness from that limitless ocean of being, of which sometimes he was aware.

On her face was an amused smile, and within her dark eyes was a look and a significance which he did not want to meet. As if feeling her power, she continued to watch him in silence. The boy felt that

beneath that mocking inquiry all his ignorance, his lack of experience was exposed. He was charged with indignant shame and with anger, for in those moments he knew that whatever her knowledge might be, she would never come to know the things that he well understood. An alien ignorance looked out of those dark eyes. He despised her, but was impotent to answer the ironical questioning. Doubting how to repulse this outrage upon his privacy, he stood up and faced her.

Although he was now grown to be almost of man's stature, a big, strong boy, well equipped for the arduous physical labour of a man, he possessed in this field no weapons but those of childhood. He was hard pressed, and his resentment found expression in a child's repost. He scowled, made a face and put out his tongue. A moment later, feeling the ineptitude of his action, he turned and made off amongst the undergrowth. Her voice rang after him taunting, yet somehow sweet: "Little fool, silly little fool."

How he hated her!

Chapter 6: *The Way of the Desert*

I

THOSE years which mark the passage from boyhood to youth and from youth to manhood are registered by salient events rather than by conscious development. Life flashes intimations of its purpose; the pulse of being seems restless rather than rhythmical, and though the rhythm may be there, it is not perceived. Against the accustomed background there stand out events, memories which remain. They are the ganglia, the vital nervous centres of our development; they exist not only as we sometimes imagine, in the past, but their vibrations are of the present and of the future. For Martin the daily routine stretched over weeks, weeks passed into months. The well-known ride through the bush to school, the rather dull lessons, the return home, the days of freedom, of sheep and cattle herding, all the various business of life merged into a firm and seemingly stable texture. For the most part he did not probe beneath the surface of sensation; he did not indeed consciously probe at all. If certain events became fixed for all time in his memory, it was because, in them, the conflict between the expanding forces of personality appeared in contrast to the serene and unchanging peacefulness of the desert.

Nance, who at the first had brought with so sharp a questioning the antagonism of sex into his life, became in a short while a simple and easy-going companion. So early as her first visit, she had won him by the simplicity of her nature. On the second day she had been as good as her word, and the three of them had gone kangaroo hunting. Martin admired and rather envied the light handling of the reins which gave her such easy mastery over her horse. He exerted himself to appear to advantage in her eyes, feeling that she might have behaved very differently towards him, and for some reason, which he did not analyse, might have resented his presence. On the way back from the hunt, she questioned him about his school and his earlier life at Nallagoo. She made him tell about his sister and their bush-wanderings together. She thought it a fine thing to be brought up in the wild bush.

"I have often looked at the native camps," she told him, "and have wondered what sort of life must be a black woman's living in the bush without even a hut . . . no roof to shut out the sky. I sometimes fancy I'd like it . . . to be accustomed to that and nothing else."

He looked at her with kindled interest, puzzled.

"No, not really," she laughed, shaking her head.

"Where do you live?" Martin asked.

Nance smiled and paused. The boy noticed her lips a little apart, the bright colour under her skin, and saw from her eyes that she was thinking. She answered, "In a house, not like a black gin under the sky. Not in the bush either, worse luck. Not the real bush. When I get fed-up with where I live, then

I come here for a bit and stay at Seven Trees."

Martin was not altogether satisfied with this answer. "What is your name, your other name besides Nance?" he asked.

"You're a lad for questions, aren't you?" she smiled at him brightly, then with a toss of her head, "You can call me Nance, that's name enough."

When two days later she rode away again, Martin knew that he would miss her, and felt a pang at her departure. During the passage of her short visit, he had learnt more than he could have found words to express. He now sensed something of the difference between men and women. She was the first woman that he had seen and recognized as essentially different and complementary to himself. Her reticence about her name and about where she lived hinted in some vague way at those mysteries which in the cool moonlight he had imagined, and upon which the hut door had been shut. There was also between them a definite though unspoken exchange. Without words she had conveyed that she was a little at his discretion. This apprehension gave a certain raw shyness to his own senses, and he would have liked to have given her an assurance that he had no inclination to learn from elsewhere those facts she had wished to keep hidden. He would have liked to assure her that nothing would induce him to do so, but he was fortunately shy of words, and perhaps, being a woman, she had no need of a spoken promise.

When she left, Martin was both glad and sorry, but within a few days his life flowed smoothly once more along its accustomed course. The work of his hands and the sweat of his body were in harmony with

that wide environment, and his spirit was again in touch with the peacefulness of the desert. Often in some pause in his work, he would look round and would perhaps notice a light breeze that was passing, or the poise of a branch, dry-leaved and brittle against the sunlight, or the swift dart of some hovering insect. He would regard them with a wondering satisfaction; such things had their significance, and in their recognition he was happy.

With Alec his early established comradeship developed along simple lines. Man and boy grew accustomed to each other's presence and to the work which they shared. Alec counted upon those days when Martin would be free to give help. The months as they passed discovered differences of character, and Martin, though learning to criticize the slow thoroughness of his friend, admired and was influenced. Yet the boy's mind was far quicker, all his senses were more alert. His sight and hearing were aware of things that Alec missed. Although the man knew the bush with that knowledge and love that comes of long experience, he saw and heard with the senses of a man who in later life had learned to see and hear. His sight had not been trained like Martin's in competition with black fellows. He did not see the leaf-coloured grass-hoppers and praying insects on the bushes as he cantered by, nor did he distinguish the foot-marks in the dust, nor see the cattle mobs in the distance when they were merged in the blue rim of the horizon. It was often difficult for Martin to go slow enough in his work to follow the lines of Alec's established habit. There would be altercations, and Martin would have to give way.

When they were loading fleeces for transport, Martin's task was to stand on the big wagons and receive the tightly rolled packets of wool that Alec pitched up. He arranged them as he was told, piling them across and across from the outside toward the centre. He placed them well enough as he thought. "Now, what are you doing there?" Alec shouted. "Keep them straight on the sides and away from under your feet."

"I must fill up the centre a bit."

"No, that's not the way."

"It's good enough," gasped Martin, swearing and tugging at the heavy fleeces.

"No, come out of it. There's only one way, and that's the right way. . . . Stand out of the road." Alec had climbed up into the wagon and was arranging the fleeces in neat rows as carefully as if he were making a bed, so that they lay side by side with no gaps. "Have you no proper sense as to how things should be? Would you have them shift and fall out before they were half done with the journey?"

Martin felt sure that the fleeces would not have rolled off, yet he stood rebuked. He learned thus to follow Alec's example, and later to take a pride in his manner of doing things. What remained for him his favourite work, however, were those exercises that demanded a quick perception and quick decision. As herdsman and shepherd he was naturally efficient; he did the right thing instinctively, seldom having to wait for orders.

Sometimes there would be longer expeditions, lasting for several days, to outlying parts of the station. They would take their provisions with them, flour and

raw meat, a quarter of a sheep, perhaps, wrapped in a muslin sack. They would cook their food in the open on a fire of gathered branches, they would sleep on the bare ground, with their horses hobbled and grazing at a short distance. It was on one of these expeditions that they fell in with four riders, two white men and two black. The white men were miners from the upper Murchinson River, and the story that they told left in Martin a sense of wonder and excitement. They rode into Alec's camp early one morning and stayed to take breakfast. The black boys squatted at a short distance, kindling a small fire of their own.

The men were tired after a long search for one of their companions, whom at last they had found dead and stark naked. The younger man, who wore a red shirt and who confessed to not having been long in that part of the country, was shaken by his experience. His forehead was drawn into a perpetual frown and his eyes looked constantly and quickly from one point to another of the desert horizon. His companion, an older man, with a beard which seemed grizzled beneath the red dust which hung in it, spoke little and seemed unmoved.

"Ay it's an easy country for a man to lose his bearings," said the younger man. "I wouldn't trust myself."

Alec nodded. "Perhaps it is for those who don't know it."

"That was his case, though he'd been out six months and more; he thought he knew." Then after a pause: "He strayed a long way before he dropped."

"He did that, longer than most," said the older man slowly.

Alec was attending to the cooking of meat and the boiling of the billy. He did not speak for a while, but when he spoke showed that his thought had been occupied with the fate of the lost man. "You say he'd taken off all his clothes before he dropped? I've heard of that before. A funny thing that, eh?"

"Yes, it's queer. . . . I hear they are often taken that way." Then to his companion: "Do you remember old Bert Thompson? . . . thought he knew the country pretty well, and so he did. He strayed away and got bushed. . . . It wasn't more than twelve hours or so. When they found him,—they had black trackers same as we did,—he was stark, same as this chap, and digging his own grave, raving mad. They had to strap him up. He never got his senses back. He died a few days after, though he was a strong man in body, not starved or failing."

"Ay, I remember," said his companion. Then adding as if an afterthought. "It isn't every one who can stand living in these parts. It gets on the nerves. I've known men go out and shoot themselves for no other reason but that they had stayed too long in the bush. It's happened often. It gets on the nerves," he repeated.

The younger man moved uneasily. "They bloody-well can't stand it." He spat into the fire. "I'm not sure I could stand it myself, not all alone like some fellows do."

"Where did this chap come from?" asked Alec.

"A prospector from Perth, been fossicking about

with a pal for some time; then he takes it into his head to go out alone like a fool, and gets bushed. We didn't notice for two days that he wasn't in camp. As soon as we did we got the black boys on his trail. It took some time to follow him up. He left a straight trail for a while, and we could see where he had been tapping at stones with his hammer, collecting samples. Then his track went zigzagging about every way, round and round. He didn't chip any stones now, was occupied with other thoughts, I guess. After a bit we found his coat, then his trousers and shirt. The black boys grinned, they'd seen that kind of thing before and knew what it meant. 'Not long time now, find him plenty soon,' they said. . . . He chucked off everything except his boots, he kept them on till last, then he chucked them too. I suppose he felt his feet hot. . . . Damned funny," he added musingly. . . . "It wasn't long after that we found him. He'd scratched a bit of a hole before he died."

Martin was watching the narrator wide-eyed. He knew that this was the truth. This man was speaking the truth about the desert, speaking of a quality which was not always shown, but of which Martin himself had had experience. The desert was remorseless, it killed like that, and the next morning it would smile as serenely as ever. It was quite oblivious to the life of men, to their needs, their sorrows or their ravings. Its innocence remained unsullied. It was the men who were proved guilty of rashness, of unjustified familiarity.

The question rose to his lips impetuously though

he knew what the answer would be: "What did you do with him?"

The man in the red shirt looked at the boy almost fiercely, scornfully. "He wasn't exactly a nosegay, not the sort of thing to carry about. . . . Dug the hole a bit deeper and shoved him in."

Martin remembered his mother, she had been buried like that. She had been put into a hole in the red dust and forgotten. The same fate might have been his own and that of his brothers and sister. He had been threatened by that impersonal, remorseless power, but he bore no grudge. He loved the desert, he did not fear it. It had been his nurse, his second mother, his most intimate friend. It was a challenge and a test to his growing strength. He could live close to it, perceiving something of its august beauty without fear. He was not in the least daunted. Though men should fail and die and their bodies be buried under the red dust it would be for ever unchanged. Its qualities were imperishable, eternally youthful, eternally innocent.

"What's the lad thinking of? It gives you something to think about, eh?"

"Oh, nothing," he felt suddenly self-conscious.

Alec did not tell the story of the trek, but he mentioned that the boy had lived in the desert for some years and that his mother had died and been buried there.

The older man with the grizzled beard and hair that was turning white did not say anything, he lighted his pipe native-fashion with a hot ember which he picked up in his naked fingers. The younger man

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scowled and spat. "It's a bloody dangerous country to go straying about in, a dirty, treacherous country. . . . I wouldn't trust myself alone here without the black trackers." He shook his head and stared fixedly at the boy. "Be careful of it. It may get you any time when you are not expecting it. Why, I've heard of a man walk out a few yards from a cart-track and be lost, couldn't find his way back."

Martin laughed.

Chapter 7: *At the Settlement*

I

WEEKS passed and months, and all the while Martin kept a fairly regular attendance at school. Sometimes he would miss several days and on occasions even a week when Alec wanted him to help with special work. Amongst the other children he was neither popular nor unpopular; he made no intimate friendships. The school at the settlement had no organization for games, and there were not many opportunities for meeting or recreation. In their home life the bush children were close against realities; both boys and girls were accustomed to help their parents with the farm work, and in many cases the time for schooling was given grudgingly. The chief occasion for meeting and making friends was in the evenings when they rode homeward together through the bush. But here too Martin's way lay solitary since there was no other farm near Seven Gums, and after the first half mile he would bid good-bye to his companions.

Although he early became familiar with the school routine, he did not, as did some of the other children, enter into the social life at the creek, but remained rather a spectator, feeling intuitively that his deeper interest was for the open spaces of the plain. These people that he met were all very well in their way,

but to his youthful egoism it did not seem that they mattered very much to *him*. Evans and his wife alone interested him, and the early interest that they excited did not fade. It was a compound of repulsion and attraction; he did not ask himself which element preponderated, but was interested to listen to whatever conversation concerning the two that he might hear. There was an increasing deal of such conversation. Evans was not popular; he had never been popular, and was only tolerated because there was no other store-keeper in the settlement. Men distrusted him. Why was he seen talking so often to little Lucy Maitland? She would surely have the good sense to see what sort of a fellow he was. If she was not a fool she would send him about his business. There were rumours about. Two of the children had found her alone in the empty school-room late one evening. She had been crying, and when they spoke to her had turned away without speaking. During class time Martin would gaze at her, wondering how Evans would appear in her eyes. What was the meaning of this talk that he heard, this business that there was between men and women? Once she had met his steady speculative stare and had blushed. After that he felt vaguely concerned, and wondered about the hints that were dropped. Why should it be that the names of that dark little man and this fair-haired woman should be coupled together? Was it with them as it was with Nance and Alec? Then there was Jane; the boy often thought of her with her white face and dark hair and dark alert eyes. He believed that he would never be able to forget her mocking laugh.

There came a time when every one in that small

community was aware that some crisis was impending. Perhaps Evans would be forcibly expelled and would take with him that black witch of a girl that he had brought. It would be a good riddance, but what grounds had they for so extreme a line of action? Certainly he swindled over the stores and charged exorbitant prices, but then most store-keepers were like that. Women would stand in little groups talking together; their voices would be lowered as the children came near. Evans on his side did not seem much concerned, he was such a one as would shrug his shoulders and take his own course. Yet he became more silent than usual, he did not joke as he used in his quizzing, ironical manner. This place was a one-horse place, he would leave it and go elsewhere, he said. Jane alone was unchanged; to every one she remained the same as when she first came to the settlement. "She's a sly one," the women said and wasted few words on her. Men when they spoke of her watched one another knowingly and sometimes laughed. On Martin she had always a disturbing influence. From under the folds of her black hair, her face would shine with an amazing pallor, like a flash of inspiration in a dark dream.

Neither of them had made any allusion to their meeting in the ravine, but sometimes when she looked at him a gentle smile would turn up the corners of her mouth. Martin felt the colour covering his face and neck. He remembered how Lucy had blushed when he stared at her, and he hated this weakness that he could not control. He would find himself thinking about Jane, aware of the look and presence of her even when far away in the bush.

On a certain day he had to go to the store to make purchases on Alec's behalf. Finding no one in the shop, he walked along the passage to one of the inner rooms. He came suddenly to a stop, horrified and frightened at what he saw. Jane was lying on the floor, she was panting with deep breaths, though with her voice she made no sound. Evans knelt over her; he had one knee in the small of her back, and held her right arm twisted, wrenched and taut. He hit savagely at her arm and sometimes at her face. Her cheek was pressed against the ground. His own face and neck were bleeding, and blood-drops fell onto the girl's hair. They hung like jewels in the dark folds, gleaming, and a wet smear was bright and clear against her white skin. "I'll teach you to bite, damn you. I'll teach you," the man muttered between the blows. The girl made no sign, but from time to time a shiver went over her body. A fixed frown was on her forehead, and from where she lay she looked at Martin with a seemingly impassive look, a vacant stare. Then she closed her eyes.

When Evans became aware of the boy's presence, he was abashed and released his hold. "Get up and get out of it," he said. Jane did not move. The man stood up, wiping his cheek and neck. "See where she bit me . . . the bloody harlot." Then to Martin savagely: "Well, what do *you* want?" He came towards the boy, half shutting his eyes, and bending so that his face was close to Martin's face. "Say what you want. You are not dumb, are you? Speak up or clear out. As for her, she's got a little bit of what she deserves, that's all."

Martin, frightened at the look of savageness,

stepped back. This human brutality was more difficult to meet than the wrath of the wild cattle of the plains. He was inclined to turn and run, but he stood his ground and named his requirements. Evans still muttered to himself. Jane lay on the floor, she had rolled over on to her face, her body shivered, but she made no sound.

Once in the open again, Martin ran to where his horse was tethered. He did not tell any one of what he had seen, but mounted and at a gallop rode out of the compound.

II

Twice during the first two years Barclay came to see his son. He brought news of Mary and the other children who were lodged with a dairy-farmer and his wife at Caple, a small township on the South-West coast. He seemed in a slight degree pleased at the boy's vigorous physique; the same tough, wiry build as his own, the muscles hard, close-packed on large bones. On the second visit he stayed for three days, and rode round the station with Alec, having a keen eye to the stock and management, also watching to see how well his son understood the various work. For the most part he was silent, and no very genial companion, and towards the end of his visit his manner became markedly depressed. He found a bitterness in seeing another succeed where he had failed. He asked Martin sarcastically: "I suppose in a year or two you will be wanting to set up on your own, eh?"

The idea was new to the boy. It seemed absurd, yet it thrilled him with a vague and delightful hope. He had not before considered such a possibility.

"Don't be such a damn fool," his father added. "Work for wages, learn at another man's expense."

Alec felt a certain contemptuous pity for the older man; grey head and lined, sour-looking visage were pathetic. That was one sort of wisdom certainly, all right as far as it went, but it stopped short too soon, short of success. He kept silent, but later found occasion to say that Martin promised to do well, a good worker though a bit impetuous. In a few months when the lad left school, he would pay him a man's wage. He does a man's work and will be worth the money.

At parting Barclay kissed his son. That curious ritual habit was duly observed; it was the one action that brought them into any sort of contact. He rode away sour and taciturn as always, and Martin was glad of his departure.

III

During the last year, Nance, whose visits were more frequent than at first, engaged much of his thoughts. He was now more than fifteen years old, and very well understood that her relation with Alec was other than that of man and wife; at the same time he recognized the naturalness of their association. He understood that there was a need of secrecy, this and other salient facts were obvious enough, and he could see that these people in the simplicity of their needs were good comrades. He wondered sometimes why they did not marry as other folks married and set up a house together, but Alec would never give him an opportunity of talking upon this subject; indeed he would have been far too shy ever to mention it. What was not

yet within the range of his experience he was willing enough to accept on trust. Yet he wondered about the other life that the girl led: what was her name and where did she come from? He knew very well that he could find out these details if he wished, but his curiosity was not of that kind, he but speculated vaguely. He believed that she must have good reasons for her reticence, it was not for him to inquire. His feeling concerning her visits were simpler than at first. He was glad when she came, glad because of her friendliness and of that simple generosity that would include him in any pleasure-expedition that was on foot.

This growing relation with Nance was very different from anything that had hitherto come into his life. With Alec he could talk with perfect freedom about the work on the station, about the animals, or about the bush; but about himself and the growth of his own feelings he felt a certain shyness, fearing the candour of those rather mocking blue eyes. Alec was not the sort of man to talk with about such things. With Nance there was a difference, she invited confidence. It was lovely to be able to talk to her about himself and the undercurrents in the life of the settlement, which he found so exciting and strange. He told of Evans and Jane; how Evans was feared and disliked, of what was said of his being in love with Lucy Maitland, and how Lucy had been found one evening crying in the big school-room. He talked about Jane, of her white face and her curious way of looking at one. These things he told, but he did not tell of that horrible time when Jane had laughed at him in the wood and had called him a silly little fool.

"Have you ever been to Gum-tree Creek?" he asked.

Nance looked at him, frowned slightly and nodded.

"Yes, but not lately."

"Then of course you know all these people?"

"Ay, some of them."

After a pause he said: "They don't get along very well, not always."

"Who don't?"

"Harry Evans and Jane."

"Don't they?"

"No, I went up to the store the other day to get some things for Alec. . . . He was giving it her like anything. He'd knocked her down and was twisting her arm. He was savage."

"What was she doing?"

"She lay still while he hit her. She'd bitten him in the neck, but that was before I came in."

"She'd bitten him?" said Nance.

"Yes, he was bleeding. That's what made him so mad."

The girl's eyes were very bright as she listened. She looked at Martin half protectingly and half with a glance that he didn't wholly understand. He thought she was very pretty, her open, red lips were lovely. He was charmed by that strange smile. "I expect she deserved all she got," was her comment. "And he too, the bites. They are not so badly matched, after all."

IV

The situation at the Creek reached the climax that might have been foreseen, yet the community in gen-

eral were taken by surprise. Evans and Lucy Maitland disappeared from the settlement on the same night; they had driven westward towards the railway; no doubt their destination would be either Rupert-town or Karnarvon. Evans had taken all the money that he could lay hands on, but there were some stores left in the little shop, and with these it seemed possible that Jane should for a while be able to support a living. Had her conduct taken that line expected of a deserted wife she might have received some sympathy, but to the outside world she did not seem much put out by the sudden absconding of her man. She remained at the store, shrugged her thin shoulders and laughed. Once when Evans was mentioned, she said scornfully: "He'll soon get sick of that white-headed doll. In less than six months he'll kill the life out of her." To those who heard them, these words did not seem an unlikely form of exaggeration.

Martin received the news with a throb of excitement. Of course he might have known that it would finish like that: they had gone off together. It was hard luck on Lucy, but why, why had she gone? That was the question that was so exciting and interesting. Certainly, she would never be able to fight with him, and, like Jane, bite if need be. She was no fool, he knew that, and yet she had gone with that beast of a fellow. Yes, he was a beast, it was just that that made him attractive. Martin frowned; this man and woman business was troubling. He thought of Jane alone at the store, and was troubled at the thought of her being there alone. He was blown upon by a feeling of vague excitement.

For two days he avoided her. It would be easy to

avoid seeing her altogether, for at the end of that week, he would be coming no more to the settlement, but would remain at Seven Trees to work full time with Alec. In his imagination he pictured just how she would be, scornful, and confident in herself. . . . And then, of course, Evans would be bound to come back, or she would go and join him, sooner or later that would happen, as Nance had said they were well matched. . . . Why shouldn't he go and see her, if only to say good-bye. He guessed that she would expect to see him, and he would like to hear what she had to say about Evans.

In the afternoon he strolled up to the store. She hardly turned her head to look at him, yet he could see that she was glad he had come. They exchanged casual greetings, then glancing quickly at him she said, "So you've heard the news? He's gone."

Martin nodded.

She stood looking thoughtfully at him under her level brows and said slowly as if weighing her words: "Harry was always a bit of a fool you know. A fool over women. . . . By God, a bloody fool." Then changing her mood and with it her tone of voice: "You see I'm mistress here now. I rather like being alone. . . . A whole house of my own . . . till the rent's due. It's a big house, what do you think, eh?"

"Yes, it's a big place." He was cautious, knowing intuitively that he was on dangerous ground, he was uncertain of her.

"I'm making some tea. Will you come in and sit down?"

For just a moment he hesitated; as he entered he

felt the finality of an irreparable act. His blood pulsed in his neck and face. He was like an insect caught in a web; he rather liked being caught, it was wonderful, and an adventure.

Jane moved leisurely about the room, she poured out tea and handed him a cup. She sat down beside the table. She was silent now and let her eyes rest on him. Martin was keenly conscious of her gaze, and knew its quizzing, critical quality for the same he had before experienced.

He raised his eyes to meet it. . . .

He put down his cup of tea untasted, and stood up, his hand was shaking a little and his heart beating fast. Her eyes were cold and unshifting; through them she communicated all the sensuality of her body; into his blood they seemed to inject fierce pulsations of desire. He took a step forward, and with a gentle subtile movement the girl stood up to meet him. In that moment, he took in quickly, though definitely, all the details of her face: her thin lips curled by that ever-mocking smile, the pale curve of her cheek, her dark eyes, and, above her forehead, all the mass of her hair. In another step he caught her roughly in his arms, he crushed her body against his own; he was kissing her face and neck with impetuous, unexperienced kisses. "Eh, but you are a rough one," she said, and the timbre of her voice was deeper than usual. Then she yielded her mouth to his, holding close to him, absorbing and guiding the untutoured onrush of his passion. Her kiss seemed to draw away the very forces of his life. He was trembling, bewildered, a little frightened at himself, a little shocked.

Her hair had shaken loose over her shoulder, he inhaled the sweet scent of it, and fearing to meet her eyes, hugged her desperately.

She stiffened suddenly and pushed him away. "Look out," she said, "there's some one in the store."

He cursed, loosening his hold, and frowned.

"Stay here I'll soon be back."

He stood alone in the empty room still frowning and biting the knuckles of his right hand. But when she had served the customer and returned, the spell had been broken. He felt a hatred for the small, confined space, and the smell of tarred wood in hot sunlight was oppressive. He was diffident towards what he had done and a little ashamed; yet he knew that the barriers were down, once and for all. It was a matter time would develop, he would taste to the full this new, sweet excitement, but not now. He was afraid, instinctively distrustful of this woman, and aware of her antagonism; she would make a fool of him again and laugh at him. She had come back now and was regarding him with that exasperating, non-committal look. Intuitively he was repelled, though instinctively attracted to subdue and possess.

"Well, you're a nice one! Who would have thought that of you?"

Her words jarred on him. His frown deepened as he moved towards the door. "Hullo, where are you off to?"

"I'll clear off now," he said ungraciously.

"For why?"

"I must get back, I've work to do before evening." Then with a sudden ring of confidence he added, "I'll come again tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow night!" she repeated. She liked him the better for his attempt at masculine domination, but what would it avail? After tomorrow she would do what she liked with him; he was just the sort of boy she would find easy and yet rather interesting to manage. She was confident of her power. Tomorrow or tonight it would make very little difference.

"Ay," said Martin.

"Suppose I'm not here?"

He made as if to speak but thought better of it.

"You think I will be?"

"I'll chance it."

"You're a fine lad," she said sarcastically.

He was in the passage now, but had an impulse to turn back. The waves of attraction and repulsion were surging through heart and brain. He was tense with emotion. In those moments he hated her, though he loved the power of her womanhood. He was fully aware of the deep antagonism between himself and the hard, sly soul of this girl.

"Won't you drink your tea before you go?" she called.

He shook his head, turned and walked out.

Chapter 8: *Nance*

I

MOST of the way back to Seven Trees Martin rode at a gallop. He was elated, stung by his adventure. He did not notice the familiar route, but passed unheeding, living an inner life of anticipation and triumph. In these moments, his past experience, all his knowledge and deep love of the desert made no conscious claim upon the future, he was glad only that he had been master of himself, and that he had held off, if only for a day. There was joy in this escape, joy, too, in the thought of surrender to his passion. Elated by the vital forces that were his, he gripped the saddle tight with his knees so that his horse lay back its ears and shook its head in remonstrance. If the boy shut his eyes, Jane's white face floated before them; he could still smell the scent of her hair. He did not question in the least whether he loved her or hated her, these words had no significance as yet. Perhaps he loved Alec a little, and Nance, and Mary, too, in those past years at the old homestead. If this fierce feeling was love, it was a brutal sort of love, antagonistic, a demand for mastery.

As he came nearer to Seven Trees, he made his horse walk. He did not want to arrive in a lather of sweat. Nance was staying at the camp and she would notice anything unusual in his manner. He mused for

a while on the difference between the two women. Nance was, of course, older than Jane, but not much. She was to be trusted, a good friend. He couldn't imagine Alec having much to say to Jane. He wondered, as he had often wondered, why it was that Nance and Alec did not marry. She was the sort of girl a man might marry, and in that too she was different from Jane.

It was past sunset when he reached the camp. Nance was cooking supper and Alec was not yet returned. After unsaddling his horse, feeding it and turning it loose, he sat down to wait. The tropical twilight came quickly, and stars were already showing. Nance called: "Alec is late tonight. Do you know where he went?"

"No, I don't know."

"Are you hungry for your supper?"

"No, I can wait." Martin was not anxious to talk. They were silent for a while, then Nance came and stood beside him.

"It's a funny thing his being late like this," she said. "You don't think anything could have happened to him, do you?"

"What sort of thing?" said Martin, unimaginationally.

"I don't know, some sort of accident?"

"Why should it? Of course not."

Nance sat down at a little distance and began whistling. She broke off before long. "It's queer his being so late," she said. Then since Martin did not speak: "He said he'd be back in good time." Again after a pause, "What's the matter with you? Have you got the sulks?"

"No."

"Well I wish you'd talk a little. I can't help feeling anxious about Alec. I feel as if some accident may have happened to him."

This time Martin looked at her, rousing himself to a certain interest. "He's all right. I've known him to stay out a whole night."

"Yes, but he said he'd be back early. I expected him hours ago."

Martin stood up and looked round into the clear darkness. "He'll be all right," he repeated. "What could happen to him?"

They waited another hour, then they had supper. While they were eating their meal they heard the sound of hoofs approaching. Martin bit his lip with a feeling of apprehension as a riderless horse cantered into the firelight. "Something does seem a bit wrong," he admitted.

"I knew it, I knew something was wrong," said Nance. Her face was pale in the fire-light and her eyes were bright. "I knew something was wrong," she repeated slowly. "Look at the reins, they are broken. . . . That may be through the colt stepping on them, they are old ones."

They went up to the horse and felt him to see if he was hurt. "He's barely warm," said Martin. "He has taken his time. The colt's all right."

Martin's own feelings of anxiety, whatever they might have been, were lost, drowned as it were, in the greater anxiety of the girl. Her apprehensions moved so quickly that he felt like one dragged along at an unjustifiable pace. For a few moments while she stood feeling the horse's shoulder and fore-leg, he

noticed the peculiar movements of her hands, the spread feminine fingers and the delicate wrists. He could feel, as he watched, how great and absorbing was her fear. He was a little envious of her distress, and for the first time was strengthened by a wave of protecting tenderness, different altogether from the objective pity of childhood. As in the growing silence he watched, her face was contracted by a spasm of pain. Amid the unfamiliar ugliness of that contortion, he perceived a yet stranger beauty. "Oh, Alec," she said, and then paused. She shook her head brusquely, turned and walked away.

"What are you going to do?"

"Going off to look for him."

"It's pretty near pitch dark and there is no moon till midnight."

"I know, but he may hear me."

"At least you'd better ride," he said. "I'll get your horse. Wait a bit and I'll come with you."

They started out together, but soon separated on the agreement that they would both return to the camp at sunrise. "He might have walked in and be waiting for us," Martin suggested cheerfully.

As soon as he was by himself, Martin realized what a fool-chase it was. It did not seem likely that Alec should have come by any harm, and even if the worst had happened, how could they find him in the dark? He kept his horse ambling along at a gentle pace, keeping within distance of Nance's shrill cooees, which from time to time pierced the silence.

He dismounted after a while and tethered his horse. He lay down and slept for a few hours, and woke with the moonlight on his face. There was enough light

now to see by, he started a more systematic search. The desert was very calm in the soft light, the feathery branches rose in silver and white plumes from their pools of shadow. They were like fountains of feathers held motionless in the moonlight. There were soft, rustling noises of animals moving unseen, and all the while there was a sense of expectation, of something just about to happen that held fire. Martin was familiar with this sense of expectation, it was one of the chief attributes of the desert; he was conscious, too, of the rhythmical undulations of the land which went rolling away in furrows across the blank face of the continent, naked under the sky; conscious, too, of the black dome where the stars glittered, which by the power of its incomprehensible aloofness held down in concentrated form a sense of great things immanent, a secret always about to be uttered but which never was betrayed.

As he rode through the moonlight, all the passionate tumult of the day subsided, his mind became placid. At sunrise he turned back towards the hut, hoping and half believing that his friend would be there awaiting his return. Nance was alone. He answered her eager interrogations. No, he had seen nothing, not any sort of a clue.

Nance was tired, dry-eyed and silent. She had been riding all night, shouting and cooing. Martin cooked some breakfast and made her eat. Before she had finished the meal, she broke out into sobs. He watched her, unable to express any sympathy; he frowned and was silent.

"He's dead. I feel sure he's dead." She spoke

between her sobs. Martin remained silent; he could not think of anything to say.

After a short rest they set out once more. Nance tried to persuade him to let her go separately, saying that in this way they would cover more ground, but Martin would not agree. He was not going to allow her out of his sight; she was too tired, too near the limit of her control. He knew the desert and was not taking unnecessary risks.

All that day they searched, visiting different parts of the station, and at night returned to the camp. It was easier to talk now; they spoke of the things that he might have done, of places he might have visited. Nance talked about Alec, and, in the silences, tears would run down her cheeks. Martin thought of the appointment that he had left unfulfilled. Jane could go to hell now for all he cared. She would be waiting for him. Let her wait! . . . He persuaded Nance to lie down in the hut and rest. He too lay down and soon slept. He was awakened by growls from one of the dogs. The animal was bristling with head low and growling. For a time Martin could hear nothing, then far away . . . yes . . . there were dingoes howling. They were barking too and fighting. He shuddered as he wondered what it might be they were fighting over. He noted as well as he could the distance and the direction. Nance was in the hut and asleep. He was glad of that. He moved nearer, and lay down within easy distance of the door.

The next day, Martin proved that his conjecture had been right. They found Alec's body; it had been

fought over and partly eaten by dingoes. There were wounds from horns in the side and back. The body was much trampled upon, and it looked as if a herd of cattle had trampled over him. "He must have dismounted to do some job, to mend the fence perhaps," said Martin. He felt an irremediable helplessness as he regarded the dead body of his friend and the tense, controlled bearing of the girl. "His horse must have broken away and left him, then, when he was walking back, he was caught by the cattle."

Nance had knelt down beside the dead man and had bent over him, but she sprang up again quickly. "Oh Martin, if we could only have found him earlier, before . . . before last night. . . ." She paused. . . . "What are we to do?" She was become dependent on Martin, looking to him for a lead.

"Shall I ride to the Creek? I can get help there. I could come back with a horse and cart."

"No, don't do that," she answered at once. "I don't think I could bear that. Not any one from the Creek. . . . No one else."

"What are we to do then?"

"We must bury his poor body. It ought to have been buried long ago." She seemed calm and deliberate. "You go back for a spade and a pick. I'll wait here."

"You'll stay right here, you won't go roaming about?"

"No, I'll stay here, where else should I want to go?" She seemed suddenly to have become relaxed, broken and submissive. "Go and fetch the things,

there's a good boy. I shall like to be here alone. I shall sleep; I'm so tired."

"You stay here till I come. You promise?"

"Oh yes, I promise."

He nodded, jumped on to his horse and cantered away. Twice on that exposed and level plain, he turned to look back at her. She had not moved, but was standing gazing across the desert as if wrapped in profound contemplation.

In three hours' time he was back again. He buried his friend deep, that no nosing dingo might scratch up the place. When the dust was levelled and little sign was left of the grave, Nance looked at him white-faced with a gleam of fear. "My God, to think that a man can disappear like that. . . gone. . . !" Then as if assailed by a sudden doubt: "Perhaps I ought to have given him Christian burial, but all the waiting, the talking and the fuss, I couldn't do it. I couldn't meet all that crowd at the Creek, and what would have been the good? He was never one for church-going or any stuff of that kind. You must tell them later about it when I've gone."

Martin nodded, he felt that the kindest thing was to acquiesce. The fact of death was strange and was not yet grasped in its full significance; the long search, the uncertainty and the final acceptance of the irremediable change had numbed, as it were, his senses. Now, as if suddenly revealed and with a pang, he knew the finality of death. His past life was like some land that he had left behind, his friend was gone. He himself had dug a hole in the earth, had lowered the body, had covered it with broken pieces of rock

and dust. The desert had received those mangled remains. It was a new world that he looked upon: the sunlight still bathed the landscape, the mauve distance shimmered in the waves of heat, and life in his own body pulsed no less vigorously, yet were his perceptions changed. The desert had taken on a new aspect. He knew it better than before. No, it was himself that had changed; the desert remained unalterable, it waited to be discovered, it was eternally innocent towards its children, who, for a while, lived, breathing that bright air, but who, sooner or later, lay down and were covered by the dust.

That night they were alone again at Seven Trees. As the darkness closed down, they did not need any longer to listen or to hope. Nance went into the hut where she and Alec had so often slept, and Martin lay upon the ground, gazing up through the branches into the sky. He was tired but restless. The abruptness of death was like a thorn; he found it difficult to lie still, but was too tired to want to wander about. He had a boyish need for sympathy, though what this need was he could not put into words. He lay watching the stars, finding a certain consolation in their remote sparkle. After a while he slept, but only fitfully; he awoke, aware of small, disturbing sounds. Once he raised himself on his arm and looked around. The outlines of the hut were discernible against the night sky, the line of the breakaway looked like a black cloud lying upon the earth.

He slept and woke with a start. Nance was standing beside him. Her hands were clasped under her chin and pressed to her throat, her shoulders were pressed forward a little, and she looked down at him

strangely. Her night-gown was white in the moonlight, and her hair hung in plaits over her shoulders. "Nance, what do you want?"

"I can't stand it, Martin, I can't stand it all alone in there. I can't." She made an inarticulate sound. Her voice had trembled on the edge of sobs. He could see that she, too, was trembling.

He was on his feet beside her in a moment, aware of that tender weakness that is in women and their dependency. She stepped close to him and laid a hand on his arm, her face had a childish appeal, which was pathetic. "I can't be there alone any longer." He put out his hand and touched her soft body through the thin fabric of her gown. "Oh, Martin," she said and clung to him. "I can't bear it. I can't bear it."

How different was this girl from the Nance he had known, who a week ago had been so happy and firm-hearted. By the gentle pathos of her appeal she came very close to that subconscious ocean of being from whose rhythmical and eternal tides all the sons of God and the daughters of men draw both strength and tenderness. The waters of the ocean welled forward; the youth was shaken by the strength of their onrush, he was enveloped in that vague tenderness, made man by the consciousness of that proud power. His arms went around her, and their young bodies were pressed together. "Nance, dear Nance," he said, kissing her tear-stained face.

They crouched upon the ground under the trees, upon the rough blankets upon which he slept. His hands caressed her. "Don't cry, dear darling," he said, and was surprised at the tenderness in his voice.

In the moonlight, which came chequered through the thin leaves of the eucalyptus, they lay comforting one another. Innocent in their simplicity and in the directness of their need they were able to give consolation and rest. As man and woman their bodies met in the deep life-giving embrace, comforting, untroubled by any thought of coercive morality. In their meeting, life was true to its eternal contradiction: joy counterbalanced pain. Because of their simplicity, they touched the harmony of earth. The beauty of night became their intimate possession; with love and pain warm in their hearts, they slept restfully and at peace.

Martin woke with the dawn, but Nance still slept. He regarded her sleeping face wonderingly; his heart was still open towards her, nor did he misinterpret the reality of her sorrow. She had loved Alec and had lain thus in his arms, giving him of the sweetness that was hers. She was a woman generous of her womanhood, tender in her sorrow, needing consolation. She was a live creature like himself, and he was now, even as he looked at her, newly aware of the reality of another human being, an existence parallel yet different from his own. She was a live and mysterious creature, wrung by the sorrows of her heart, responsive to the joys of her body . . . a piece of earth, a symbol and imperfection. She had given herself for a few moments utterly and without reserve; he was the richer for that gift.

When at length she opened her eyes, she lay looking at him without definite expression. By that long, vacant-seeming stare he was embarrassed, he shifted his glance. Without speaking, she rose and stood

beside him, her eyes seemed still vacant and strayed wandringly over the desert. He called her by name. She held out a hand which he grasped. With a queer smile she withdrew it, and, turning, went toward the hut. He had an impulse to jump up and run after her and break that silence, but a deeper understanding made him remain where he was.

While she was dressing, he prepared breakfast, but soon after they had sat down to the meal he saw that tears were running down her cheeks. He offered his unexperienced, boyish consolation. "Dear Nance, don't cry any more," he said. She frowned and bit her lip, checking for a moment the tears.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

He paused before answering. "I suppose we ought to tell somebody about him . . . his brother. I know that he has a brother in Ruperttown. Shall I write or will you? You could write better than I could. . . . I could go over and see Edmunsen if you liked." She waited for him to say more. "I shall have to go into the Creek when I post the letter. I must tell them about it there."

She nodded again. He could see that she was thinking, registering all these facts. Then with sudden animation: "Martin, don't do anything, don't tell any one, not for a few days, not yet."

"But why not?"

She was at a loss to explain. "I don't know," she said vaguely. Then with vehemence and shaking her head: "I couldn't bear it, not yet, wait for a day or two."

"Wait, and not do anything?" he queried, half incredulous.

"Yes, just for a little, then later. . . . I can't give up everything at once."

She was now crying again. He knelt on the ground beside her. "What is it, Nance, do tell me." She gave him her hand and silently shook her head.

"Martin."

"Yes."

She was silent and clear-eyed. "I don't want to be in all this, all the fuss that there will be. But I don't want to go away just yet, I don't feel as if I could. In a day or two I will, but in the meanwhile we can carry on, we can run the station between us. We two, easily. Nothing will come to any harm."

"Yes . . ." his answer came after a long pause. "We could." This was a strange thing, this woman was difficult to understand, with nature and motives outside his experience. Even as he considered, he was stirred with a delicious excitement; as he acquiesced he became willing and eager to do anything that she required.

"It would be hateful, all the people and all the questions. I should like to stay just a little while, here where he used to be, before I go."

"Yes," he said again, and felt a mixed stirring of pain and pleasure.

II

All day the business of the farm kept them occupied; it was reassuring to be back at work, and in the performance of accustomed tasks, Martin's spirits regained their lightness. In the dry, warm air it was difficult to remain sad, and though his friend was dead, he did not grasp the finality of that fact. For the

young who are healthy, life and death are widely separated, and in the desert borderland, where life itself seems younger than in the forest or in the city, where it remains mildly innocent of self-consciousness, men will pause for an hour or so to bury their dead, then, unaware of little beside the stream of action in which they are merged, will be carried on and away from that incident. There came memories of the night they touched, and made vibrate chords which had been mute and still; his body was filled with sensuous questionings. Alone in the desert, he found himself staring at the dry, brittle leaves and twigs. There was fascination in the silence and in the steep sunlight. Here was blended a sense of anticipation and of something accomplished.

At night he lay alone in his accustomed place. Nance went early into the hut, and he did not see her again until the morning. He lay upon the yet warm, sun-baked earth, believing that she would again come to him, hoping that he might hold her soft womanliness in his arms. Dimly he apprehended that because of her unhappiness she had come to him, yet in his heart sympathy and passion did not tread the same path. He watched and waited but did not stir; at last he lay back and slept, but the following night he went to the hut door and knocked. He waited. Nance opened to him and stood half-seen in the shadow.

"Won't you come?" he said shyly.

"No." She shook her head.

"Do come."

"No, I shouldn't have. It was wrong."

He put out his hand to touch her. She drew back.

"No, Martin, don't. Do leave me." She withdrew, closing the door suddenly, and he heard the bolt slip into its socket.

He walked away into the bush angry both with himself and with the girl. It was all so puzzling, so puzzling, and painful also.

The next morning they neither of them made allusion to the night's converse. Nance was changed, she was more like her own hard self, firmer of fibre and more self-centred. Martin felt that she was withdrawn and that there was a wider distance separating them. He learnt now something of the contradictoriness which is in women: just before they were about to mount their horses and start out on the day's work, she let drop her reins, came across to him, stood hesitating for a moment, then kissed him. Before he realized what she had done, she turned quickly away. She caught her horse and mounted. The boy swung himself into the saddle: his heart was thumping against his ribs, he was bewildered, for with that kiss came the sudden rapture of first love, its prostrating tenderness, its dancing stars submerged and sparkling in the waves. He loved her with all his untried power, all his inexperience.

Again their tasks separated them throughout the day. Martin worked hard, snatching at intervals an inward life amidst expanding fancies. In the evening he could not keep back the surge of his emotion; in simple broken phrases he told of his love. She listened, seeming at first aloof and hardly concerned, but in her isolation the flame of this boyish ardour was hard to be withstood. The long day's work in the

blazing sun had tired her, and in her mind she was tired as only women are tired when lonely and without purpose. It was consoling to feel these strong, young arms about her, and to yield, to yield to everything.

For Martin it was enough that passively she allowed herself to be worshipped, yet the time of her submission did not last for long. On the third morning she told him that she was going back to the place whence she had come. He did not at first understand that she was about to say a final farewell. "After I'm gone," she said, "you must tell the people at the Creek that he is dead. You must write to his brother at Ruperttown."

Martin pondered. "I will do that," he said, little guessing what a miserable time he would have over the business. "But why must you go now? Won't you wait and see his brother?"

She shook her head.

"When will you come back?"

Again she shook her head. "I shall not come back, I have stayed too long as it is."

"I shall come and find you."

He watched her. How puzzling she was. He was aware that she was not thinking of him. When she met his eyes, she frowned as if suddenly recollecting his presence. "I don't want you to try and find me." As if with an effort she added, "Perhaps later we shall meet, but not for a long time."

"I shall come and find you."

"You don't even know my name."

"No. You might tell me."

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"Why should I? You had much better forget me."

"I shall never forget you. I couldn't."

For a moment she seemed touched by his intense earnestness. "What is it that you really want of me?" she asked.

He found it difficult to answer, and was very shy of the words that came at length. "I don't want anything but to be near you."

She smiled, frowned, gave a little laugh. "That's calf-love, you are only a boy," she repeated. "What would you have of me? I'm too old for you to marry. . . . How do you know I'm not married already." She stood up and spoke harshly. "Can't you see that I don't want you. I must go my own way."

"I shall follow you."

"No, if you do I shall hate you."

He turned away full of anger and hurt pride, full of recriminations against her.

Few words more were spoken before she rode away; she remained wrapped in the melancholy of determination. She gave him scarce any greeting of friendship when she left.

As he watched her diminishing figure, there was bitterness in his heart. Alone in his bewilderment and pain, he looked round for comfort at the familiar and simple things which had been for so many months the material conditions of his life. He was alone, his friends had left him. The desert only remained faithful, and as he gazed into the distance of the mauve and shimmering horizon, the sun-lit plains

seemed to smile back at him with the promise of an unlimited clemency.

III

It was not till two weeks later, when in the midst of troubles with his father, and when about to leave Seven Trees on his southward journey, that he received a letter.

"DEAR MARTIN,—

"You must have thought me callous and even brutal leaving you like that, but it was all too difficult. I ought never to have come to you for comfort, though it has done *you* no harm. Forget about me. Never for a moment think that I was anything but deadly miserable when I did it, or think of me again. You are too young to understand or realize the difference in our ages and experience. Don't think of me. You may think of me just once again, later when you *are* able to understand and therefore to forgive.

"NANCE."

His first impulse was to tear it up, for he was angry that she should write to him as if he were a child. He did not tear it up, but put it away in his pocket. On many occasions afterwards he took it out and read it again and again. It left him baffled, yet not wholly so. Later, by reason of the number of readings that it received, it began to take on the personality of the woman who had written it. Little by little and very slowly he got a glimpse of what that woman might seem to herself. As the months passed and his own injury did not seem so great or so painful, he was able to forgive. His love did not wholly die but turned into grateful and soft

memory. As for passion, he had not yet tasted its consummation. Jane was forgotten, and in his memory Nance and Alec remained as examples of firm friends and lovers.

PART II

Chapter I: *A Desert Township*

I

THE train from Ruperttown to Mt. Gerard is slowly bumping its way along the badly-laid rails. It progresses unevenly by fits and starts. Should there be a gradient, it will scuttle down it, like a fox-terrier sliding over the glass panes of a cucumber-frame; if the gradient is uphill, it crawls and jolts its way to the top. Sometimes it pauses for no apparent reason. The passengers get out and talk to each other and chaff the engine-driver, then climb back to their places, as, with a whistle and a burst of steam, the engine tugs its way forward. On either side of the track there is the same monotonous country. Martin O'Brien looks upon it with insatiable eyes. He is alone in a third class carriage; the windows are open, there is in fact, no glass to them,—and the wooden shutters which are usually pulled up to exclude the sun's heat are pushed down to their full extent. The hot, dry air of the desert-borderland sweeps into the carriage together with a powdering of red dust and the sweet, most magical scent of mimosa.

For three years Martin has been away; this is his return to the land of his boyhood. Since he is alone he is under no restraint to conceal emotions that the

scene engenders. Tears of joy and recognition gather in his eyes. The landscape, though not yet identical with, is similar to the well-remembered landscape for which he has longed. The years of absence seem in retrospect to have been of intolerable length, and if they have not been, in every quality, years of failure, they have been years of exasperation and trial. Martin is nearly twenty, and often seems to himself old in the experience that he has gathered. At other times life appears a mere negation, an emptiness, and he yearns for the adventures which will not come; with eagerness he watches for familiar signs both in animal and plant. He can see, from the window, tracks of kangaroo and occasionally of bush echidna. There are the three-pronged footmarks of emu close to the line, and, at one of the halts, two of these birds, tamed by the local storekeeper, come running to meet the train. Every one, they are all men, no women on this journey, gets out for a drink. With an insequent feeling of pleasure, Martin looks at the dust-red faces, and at the dust which lies in thick creases in clothes and on boots.

The train reaches Mt. Gerard. There is a long halt for more drinks and conversation. At length a fresh start is made on the cross-desert journey towards Tharameka. Martin remembers the southward journey of three years ago, and his mind sways back reluctantly over the intervening time. He is wiser now that he has grown to be a man. Now at least he is master of his own fate, so he believes. His line of action is clear; there must be no more waste of time, he tells himself. He had gone south-

ward, believing that he was to be united in some strange and permanent way with the other members of his family. The thought of meeting his sister and his brothers had been the one thing that had made the journey worth while. But without power what was the good of anything? He thought bitterly of his sister whom he had been unable to serve. As for his brothers, he could not help them either, not till he had gained real tangible power for *himself*. Perhaps they will have to do without him and will learn to do for themselves.

He remembered the early days of his coming to Caple, his dislike for the old farmer and his wife. Collins was a "groper," that's what Mary had called him; Wouser Collins, a greedy fellow who wanted other people to work for him for nothing. Well, he had got a good slab of work out of the O'Brien family. With his sister Martin had been happy during the first months at Caple. Easily and quickly they established their old relation. There were days of holiday when they rambled the sand-dunes together. He remembered one occasion when they found human bones in the sand, the bones of many hundreds of natives, massacred by the early settlers. There was a story of a feast given long ago and a great slaying. He could still feel the excitement of that adventure. Those early days had been happy enough in spite of the hectoring demands for more work. Such miserable work it was; not the free, open work of the bush, but confined in iron cowsheds . . . perpetual milking, perpetual feeding of cattle, perpetual raking away of dung, the lifting of heavy trusses of hay, a muscle-

breaking business. Those southern farmers knew how to make work into a drudgery, a daily, miserable round, hard to break from, like a bad habit.

But the work had not mattered very much, Martin and his sister had learnt how to take their own holidays. Rebellion had been necessary. They would announce that on certain days they would be off, and Collins had found that beyond certain limits they might not be constrained.

The train now crosses the southern border of Lake Harrison; a great expanse of salt-marsh stretches on either side. There is no water in this so-called lake, but a thick incrustation of salt covers the underlying mud. The crystals are blue, green, white and silver, in the distance they give the semblance of a wide, calm sea. The afternoon sun has already fallen some distance in the sky, over against it hangs a double mirage. One picture overtops and duplicates the other. The distant plains and breakaways show like lines of scarlet and purple. For a long time the train drags its slow course across the lake. Martin falls back into reveries of the past.

He had hated Godfrey Collins; from the very first there had been a natural antipathy. Godfrey, the farmer's eldest son, had come back on a holiday from some agricultural course that he was taking in Perth. At the first, it had seemed that Mary had been ready to join her brother in his dislike and ridicule of the red, heavy face and its sulky expression, but that had not lasted long. It had seemed to Martin incomprehensible and not to be believed: there was an attraction between these two, it was something primitive and illogical, and stronger than all preconceived ideas.

The fellow had made love to her, and she had changed from a child into a woman under his touch. Perhaps at fifteen and a half she was old enough to know her own mind, but her brother had thought not. He had made a mistake, he could see that now. It would have been better had he not interfered. She had taunted him with being jealous and mean. Perhaps he was, but was it natural to let his sister waste herself on a low fellow, obviously out for what he could get?

From these unpleasant recollections, Martin shook himself. All that was past and could not be helped. Now he knew what he wanted; it was simple and straightforward. He looked out over the shining acres of salt. In its way, it was beautiful, and beyond, there was the bush just as it had always been. In a little he would be in the midst of the feathery mimosa with the bare desert dust underfoot. This land would give the consolation of its solitude, and would bring, with real work, the foundations of a career. Yet as the journey lengthened, his thoughts went back into the past. . . . He had never had a chance against Godfrey Collins, it was just a licking that he had received. The fellow was too big for him and far too heavy. He did not have a chance. The licking in itself as far as the physical pain went had not been the worst; it was miserable to feel that he was weak, not able to make his will felt, and incompetent to protect his sister. That she had not asked to be protected—had been, in fact, on the other side—there lay the real bitterness. This was no question of reason but of deep feeling, though he could comprehend the truth of what Mrs. Peppercorn, who so

unexpectedly had become his friend and confidante, had told him. She had said that no one person could protect another, nor had the right to do so without that person's consent, that actions springing from a sense of moral rectitude towards another were useless, and that each one must find his own life and gather the fruits of experience. She had said more than that, a great deal more that he remembered.

Twilight was falling and the train moved through a country which was less sparsely wooded. A number of salmon gums spread their elegant and slender branches. Martin leant out of the window tasting the first cool breaths of evening. Darkness came quickly; the outlines of underbush merged into one another, but sometimes in the faint light that the carriages cast as they moved, he could see dark forms of wallabies which crouched close to the trackway. It was a moonless, starlight night when the train reached Tharameka. It was astonishing how the town had grown in his absence. Scores of prospectors and hundreds of wage-workers must have spread northward during those three years. He had heard the rumours of fortunes to be made in a few weeks, of heavy losses and useless labour. He considered it might be a fine game for those with a taste that way, but not for him. Alec had always spoken lightly of the gold hunter; it was safer in the long run to be a farmer. Of course one needed money for a start, but only a little if one knew the right way to use it. Well, he would make money; he knew the land and knew how to work. He was confident, having no doubts about the future.

That night he slept in "The Railway Coffee Palace."

That was the euphonious name for the low-class inn crowded with miners, shepherds and toughs of every description. A very large percentage of these men were drunk, for though the coffee palace did not officially admit the sale of strong drinks, it received the overflow from the hotels, where alcohol of the cruder sorts, including a compound of methylated spirit and tobacco plug called whisky, was served *ad libitum*. At that period Tharameka, the chief mining station in the Haliard Gap district, was at the height of its prosperity. This meant that two out of every three men, after six P. M. were drunk.

There were four other occupants in the room in which Martin was to sleep. Three were in bed already. They swore and muttered, and now and then opened their eyes, looked round at the bare walls and the shining lamps, blinked, blasphemed with an embittered sincerity, lay back and were soon snoring again. The other man was a burly fellow of about four-and-twenty. He was not drunk but only half-way. Martin thought he might have been better company had he gone further in that direction.

"This is a bloody kind of hole, anyway," he began. "Hardly a white woman on the place that a self-respecting man can take up with. Nothing but Chinese whores. Chinese, that's nice, ain't it? They open the door just an inch, and squint at you. 'Ten shillin', ten shillin', that's all they can say. My God, they can bloody well go to hell.'"

Martin shrugged his shoulders. When a man was half drunk and thought himself aggrieved, it was best not to talk to him.

"What are you, anyway," said the fellow, straining

to concentrate his attention. "A bloody Wesleyan?"

After this he did not think it worth while to make any further remarks. He got into bed with his boots and clothes on, and soon fell asleep.

It was strange that there should be so many of that kind in the bush, thought Martin. Was it the gold or the whisky or the hot sun that made them like that? Well, it didn't matter, there were plenty of them all over the state north and south. Godfrey was another of that kidney. Anyway, he was glad to be back. Tomorrow he hoped he might find a job. The sooner he could get out of the town the better pleased he would be.

In the morning he went early to the Labour Exchange. It was a large building of corrugated iron with no inside lining. It was hot and stuffy with the accumulated heat and stuffiness of many days. Already the room was half-full of men. Tharameka, which was at that time head of the line, provided the chief Labour Exchange for all the district. Employers came from fifty and even a hundred miles to find labour to shear their sheep or work their mines, and every week gangs of men would start up country for various destinations. Tharameka was also the jumping-off point for prospectors. Those who were working independently or in couples would return from time to time to the township. At Tharameka they could hear all the news of the gold-fields, and be able to lay in stocks of provisions. All the life of the district converged towards the town. It was here that men were bound to meet sooner or later.

Martin waited his turn amongst the miscellaneous mob of shepherds and rouseabouts and hardened

wage-earning miners. The latter were for the most part oldish and middle-aged men. They were such as had already made their terms with destiny, and were prepared to pay the price. Good workers and heavy drinkers, their ambitions did not go beyond work and the relaxation from work. What else indeed was there to do? Martin found the atmosphere stimulating in spite of its stuffiness. There was contained there a sense of waiting activity, of much potential force. He listened to some of the conversations. A well-built, well-dressed man was talking to one of the clerks. He had the big, heavy hands of a workman, but his face was clean cut and intelligent. In one eye he wore a monocle. "I want thirty men by tomorrow night to take down to The Parrot: old hands if you can get them, not these young fellows who still think they can get on."

"You like the old workers best?" said the clerk with a tone of deference.

"Yes, and if they are drinkers, so much the better. They are not so hopeful, and work more steadily. It's the little cockeys that want to get on that are the bother; they want to tread in your slippers before you are out of them."

"I see," said the clerk with an uncomfortable, though still respectful snigger. "And the wage?"

"The minimum."

"If you could make it ten shillings, Mr. Kepple."

"Nine and six, the legal wage, not a penny more. I've been a working man myself, and I've no bowels for the working man. I've worked in the Ivanhoe in Kalgoorlie for eight shillings a day and been glad to

get it. And why should I pay more than I'm forced to? I've worked for my luck and I've waited; I've made my money through my own wits and shall spend it on my own pleasures."

"Very well; I'll do what I can for you."

"Make the number up by tomorrow night, it will be worth your while." He nodded, picked up his cane and strolled out.

"That's Clive Kepple," said a man beside Martin. He grinned sourly. "I'm one of the sort he wants, an old hand and a drinker, too, Christ curse him." He gave a short laugh. "He knows we are the ones for work, and he's quite right. He found the richest things there's ever been in the West, or rather Sam Tailor found it for him. Clive put down the money, just a little, and now he's a bleeding millionaire."

It was Martin's turn to go forward. The clerk behind the table looked up with a quick glance. "Well?"

"I want a station job, I don't mind being far out. Fencing, permanent shepherd, outrider."

"There's a party of forty going out Lake Cunnings Region tomorrow morning. Shearing. Shall I put you down?"

"I want a station job, permanent if possible."

"Sorry; can't suit you."

The clerk gave a nod of dismissal. Martin was pushed forward by the man behind. He was annoyed and half sorry that he had not taken the job that offered. It would have lasted a few weeks, and he could have come back with money in his pockets. Still he didn't want to go in a gang, but desired to be by himself in the bush. As he was leaving the ex-

change, a middle-aged man, whose clothes were thickly powdered with the familiar red dust, spoke to him.

"I heard you saying, young man, that you wanted some fencing."

"Yes, I do that. That's what I want."

"Do you know this country well? Fencing is rather a lonely job, and I've miles and miles of it to be done."

"I've lived in the country ten years on and off."

"That should do. Come and have a drink. We'll talk about this."

Mr. George Mackay, for that was the stranger's name, spoke with a slight Scotch accent. From first sight, Martin had been inclined to like the open, somewhat lined though questioning face, the blue, wide eyes and the mouth twisted slightly sideways.

The two men entered one of the hotels and pushed their way through a crowd to the public bar. "What will you take?"

"O, anything you like," said Martin, who hardly knew the names of the various drinks, and thought it up to him to accept whatever he was given.

"Well, for a young man who's got to do a lot of hard work," drawled Mr. Mackay slowly, "I should recommend a soft drink. I always take a soft drink myself." He put down his coin and gave the order. "About this job; have you done fencing before?"

"Yes, a fair bit at one time or another."

"You know what it's like? You won't go wandering off into the bush and lose yourself?"

Martin was amused at this paternal manner of address. He smiled and shook his head.

"That's all right, because if you do there will be

no one to come and find you. I live a long way out; you had better make sure you like the job before you come." Mackay smiled benignly. "You see I can't be bothered to drive in here more often than need be, and perhaps you wouldn't like to walk all the way back."

Again Martin smiled, he was amused at this slow humour.

"Will you stay six months?"

"Yes, longer if you like."

"That's a good point. You understand, you will be working alone most of that time."

Martin nodded. "That's what I want."

"Then that suits us both," said Mackay and went on to consider the question of wages by piece-work. That settled, they made an appointment for next morning. They would meet early and drive back in a buggy to Quinn's Springs.

II

That afternoon, Martin made inquiries at various stores and hotels in the town as to the whereabouts of his father, of whom he had heard no news for more than a year. It now appeared that the store-keepers in Tharameka were not much wiser than himself in this respect. They all of them had known Barclay, but none of them had news of him later than nine months old. His son learned that he had been employed at various piece-jobs in the neighbourhood. The last thing they knew of him was that he had become interested in gold, and had taken up prospecting on his own. He had bought a horse and trap and stores for a long absence. Since then he had not been

seen. Martin was not surprised at anything that his father might do, but was contemptuous that he should have been caught in this latest fever of gold hunting, which appeared in Barclay as the last hope of a bankrupt life.

The next morning as they drove over the main track leading northward from the town, Martin, with a light heart, sat beside his employer, glad that he had accomplished so easily the first part of his enterprise. The desert air was fresh from the coolness of night. After the first few furlongs of their journey, these men did not speak much to each other. Martin remained silent and Mackay fell into a low-pitched, continuous conversation with his horse, who seemed part stimulated, part irritated. They passed, at the end of the second hour, the long, iron shearing-sheds, where Martin and his sister, eight years ago, had arrived so nearly spent after the long trek from Nallagoo. This was the first time he had seen them since his departure with Alec towards Seven Gums. The time spent there had been rather wonderful, it was surprising how nice every one had been. A momentary impulse came to tell his companion of that journey, but he did not yield to the temptation; it was better to keep silent.

Mackay turned northward into what was well-known country, and they followed the track towards Seven Gums for a few miles. Martin recognized old landmarks, nothing seemed changed. The years that he had spent there now seemed like yesterday, they were still warm and familiar. Alec, of all his friends, had been most dear; he thought of his death with both pain and reproach. These past years were more vivid

than the intervening time at Caple. The pain of that time was stamped deep upon his heart. He thought, too, of Jane Evans and the attraction she had possessed. At this length of time he could be glad that their rendezvous had been broken, but in his memory of Nance was a sense of injury and smouldering pain. Why had things happened like that? Why had she left him? He could not understand. Yet did the experience, in spite of the pain, seem something pure and beautiful. It had established a standard. He was not conscious of any analysis, yet he felt that through the surrender of her grief he had touched the heart of human tenderness. He was initiated, and so for the rest of his life would be different, having a new knowledge. With Jane things would have been different, a mere brutality.

Life was difficult to comprehend; he stood on so small an island of experience. It was isolated and without attachment, floating in a sea of ignorance. He remembered how, for those few days, his life had centred burningly upon Nance. Through her he had translated all his imaginings. She was become the symbol of the desert, summing up in herself all its beauty, its tenderness, its sadness. In her arms he found its eternal youth and its undying age. She had gone from him, leaving behind only a message and a memory.

He recalled the time when he reported Alec's death at the settlement. Men had regarded him doubtfully, had spoken in short sentences. Why had there been so long a delay? There was inquiry, the body had been dug up. There were questions at the police court at Tharameka; he was not likely to forget the

bullying of the magistrate, and, worst of all, the arrival of his father: more questions, fierce now and threatening . . . the sullen anger at his reticence. He kept Nance's secret, giving them to understand that he stayed on alone to finish work, that things might be in order. This hardihood was amazing, a thin story, the magistrate remarked, yet there was a feeling amongst those present that the boy was honest, perhaps a little odd, influenced no doubt by the solitary and unusual life.

After that, the blow had fallen. Inevitable it had seemed then, now it appeared a stupid waste of time. He was sent south to improve his education and his knowledge of civilized people. Perhaps the time had not been altogether wasted; he had made a good friend of Mrs. Peppercorn. There were not many of her sort about in the West. It was she more than any one else who helped him to form this project of his. She indicated the way he should go, and had said: "It's no use trying to help others till you've learnt to help yourself. Make good, that's the first thing. Don't be like people who talk about self-sacrifice and have nothing to give."

III

Mackay had turned westward again, and was following a single wheel-track, which bent and twisted among the larger bushes. Smaller growths they drove over; often the wheels bumped over fallen stems. "You see what kind of country it is," said Mackay, breaking his monologue. It's much like this, but there are more trees and undergrowth at Quinn's Springs. It's a fine country for sheep-rearing, and

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there's plenty of feed for cattle. It's easy though to lose yourself."

"Have you been here long?"

"Three years at Quinn's Springs, but I've known the desert a lot longer than that."

"I wish I'd been here all the time," said Martin.

"Is that so?"

"I was working close to the big breakaway, before I went south, the one we crossed the end of half an hour back."

"So near as that were you?" Mackay asked questions. He remembered hearing a rumour of Alec's death. "It's a thing that might happen to any one," he said. "I suppose his horse got away, the cattle found him and it was all up. I thought of that often. A man should be able to depend on his horse." After a pause he added, "I'm glad you know the country." Then turning to Martin with a light of enthusiasm in his milky-blue eyes: "What a wonderful country it might be! Have you ever thought what men could make of it if they knew the way how, if only they saw the possibilities? Why think of it, this country could grow wheat. There's enough rainfall; with twelve inches in the year, wheat will grow well enough. It wants clearing and ploughing, that's all, and reservoirs to store the water." He looked away at the mulga-bushes and the red dust. "In my mind's eye I can see it all yellow with harvest. There could grow enough wheat on this western borderland to feed a continent."

With astonishment Martin looked at his companion. The idea of changing the character of the land seemed to him grotesque. It also shocked him. There were wheat-fields down south, and dull enough they looked.

He knew the bush better than this old man; it was unchangeable, eternally the same, safe from his touch.

"You don't think it could be done," Mackay continued. "Rainfall not regular enough perhaps. Use only a little imagination, there's water underground. A few wind-mills that's all that is needed. There's water, not drinking water, too full of salts for that, but good enough to put on the land when the seeds are germinating. Yes, thousands of acres of wheat could be grown over this region, thousands of acres."

Martin shrugged his shoulders. "What would be the good of it?" he asked.

Mackay snorted at the stupidity of the question. "Progress, development, to let a thousand men live where one man could live with difficulty before. That's a great idea, don't you think?"

The young man shook his head and looked away. "I don't know, I hadn't thought about it." Then after a pause: "I reckon it will stay as it is," he said.

Mackay seemed as if he were about to protest vehemently, but restrained himself, and after a moment's silence, his mood seemed to change. "Yes, yes," he said resignedly, "for a long time, no doubt . . . but one day."

"I hope not," said Martin.

The horse put back his ears, waved his tail and quickened his pace under the flick of the whip; when Mackay spoke his tone was a little unhappy. It was to himself more than to Martin that his words were addressed.

"One can't stand still or mark time. No history stands still; it's taking things from nature, cultivation, progress, or else being broken. Why should men

come here if it wasn't for that? We don't live just for ourselves. We put our mark on things and they are changed. We make two blades grow where one grew before; that's what it is. . . . Out here we don't even plough, not yet . . . pull up a bush or two and put up some fences. . . . It's a beginning. That's what you've come here for: breaking in the land, bringing it under 'to man."

The old boy must be a bit cracked, thought Martin, but he was interested. "I don't see it like that," he said.

"How do you see it?" Mackay had lost his enthusiasm and smiled with a soft, rather benign, though triumphant expression at the youth.

"I don't know," said Martin, puzzled. "I don't see it like that. I come here because I like the country just as it is. I should like to live here without changing anything, without changing it much, I mean. I should like to have a farm of my own; a few fences and sheep and cattle, they don't do any harm."

Mackay nodded his head. He was again deep in his thoughts. "It will break you, young fellow, or you'll break it. One or the other. It must be one or the other," he said at length. "Why should men come here at all? They don't come of their free will; we are in the hands of God, and come because we are pushed by the will of mankind, by the will of God to conquer the barren places of the earth. Don't you believe that?"

The younger man did not know how to answer these generalities. "I've come here because I want to be here," he said simply. Then promoted by a sudden curiosity: "Do you live out here alone?"

Mackay turned his wide, kindly eyes on his companion. They seemed to Martin to be sad and somewhat vacant of expression. "No, I'm not alone." As he looked ahead at the winding wheel-track, his face bore an expression of melancholy resignation. He was silent for a while, but soon reverted to the running monologue to his horse.

Chapter 2: *The Desert Horizon*

I

THE bungalow at Quinn's Springs was different from other homesteads that Martin had seen. Instead of the usual corrugated iron sheeting augmented by painted hessian, it was built for the most part of red jarra wood. The walls of weather-boarding were whitewashed that the sun's rays might be reflected rather than absorbed; the buildings were somewhat more spacious than usual, giving the impression of being, for that sultry region, cool in the interior. Along the front of the house there was a deep verandah; but what was most remarkable was the cultivated plot of land in which grew artichokes and other green vegetables. The walls and verandah were partially covered by a luxuriant growth of passion-plant and bougainvillaea, and on either side of the door grew scarlet geraniums, six foot in height and at least as wide in diameter. Mackay pointed out these unusual phenomena with a justifiable pride. During the last few miles of their journey, his absorbed half-melancholy had given place to animation, and he had commented on the various signs of his activity and the improvements that had been made. "All the posts that you see and the struts for the fences are of red jarra," he said. "It's the only wood that will stand against the white ants out

here. Some fellows put in other kinds, but I don't. They cost more at the start, but they last longer, and pay in the long run. . . . Oh, one puts a lot of money in before seeing any of it back again . . . one has to. . . . Yes, that's the garden. You don't see many of those about. Bit of a surprise. There's plenty of water here, four or five good holes that never go dry. . . . A good site for a house. . . . Quite a little oasis. . . . Do you see how green it is? . . . A different colour from the country round about."

There was indeed a contrast. The homestead lay in a slight declivity. Martin could see the wellheads boarded over, with windlasses above. He looked enviously around him: this was just the sort of place that he would like to possess, more attractive than anything he had seen or imagined, quite exceptional in this northern land. Outside the little cup, in which green plants and even grass flourished, was the typical blue-grey bush, similiar to that which he had known at Nallagoo and at Seven Trees.

A woman came out from the house, she was tall and of rather a boney build, but she was by no means ill-favoured. Martin judged that she could not be more than thirty. She wore a short, dust-coloured skirt, a man's shirt, man's leggings and a man's hat. The skin of her face and neck was darkly freckled and tanned olive brown; her grey, cold eyes were intelligent. Her face had something of a womanly fullness and softness, but there was a masculine incisiveness about the lines of her mouth and forehead. Mackay checked his horse and jumped down from the buggy. The woman, who had not yet spoken, remained standing close to the door. She held in her hand a cigarette

from which from time to time she inhaled smoke. Sometimes she let it escape languidly down her nostrils, and sometimes expelled it in a thin straight cloud from her lips. Mackay glanced at her with a certain anxiety, and Martin was surprised that neither of them had yet spoken. They unloaded the parcels from the back of the buggy. The woman took a step or two toward them, viewing the things that they placed upon the ground. "Is everything all right?" muttered Mackay without turning. "Nothing wrong? . . . I didn't stay longer than I could help."

She did not raise her voice to answer but her tones were so clean and definite as to produce in Martin an alert interest. "The dingoes have killed three sheep in the long paddock. I poisoned the bodies. . . . They have taken some of the poison, but the damned brutes will probably sick it up and be none the worse."

"Ay, it's hard to kill a dingo. We must wait up for them with rifles. . . . This is Martin O'Brien. He's come to fence the land I'm taking up beyond Turkey Creek." Then to Martin: "This is my wife."

The young woman looked at the boy critically from under her straight brows. She slightly nodded her head; then speaking to Mackay: "Does he know the country?"

"He's had nearly ten years of it, so he says."

Martin frowned as he always did when he was ill at ease. He didn't much like this woman, he felt that she was cold and hard, and that Mackay, poor old fellow was frightened of her. He also seemed a little ill at ease, and Martin was touched already with a kind of contemptuous pity.

When the buggy was unloaded and Mackay's various purchases carried within the house, he took Martin with him while he made a short tour of inspection round the farm buildings, and the one or two small enclosures near the homestead. Martin had seen a fair number of such bush farms, but never had he seen such orderliness and method. The usual scatteration of empty tins and refuse round the back premises was absent; the out-buildings were well-built and well-kept within and without. This was very different from Collins' dairy farm, where the cowsheds were ramshackle and old, and where one waded in manure; different too from the haphazard squalor of Nallagoo. It was indeed superior.

Mackay was pleased at the lad's admiration. "Ah, yes," he said, "some of the fellows about here, the Australians who have been born in the land, laugh at me. But I tell them it's easier to run things clean than dirty, and in the end it pays. It isn't," he continued, "just a matter of covering a lot of country and scratching a living from it. It's bringing land under cultivation; that's how I see it. It's the spread of civilization. My wife and I like to see things tidy and clean. In doors and out it's just the same." He paused for a moment and looked around him at his improvements. "It's a lonely life; not as if we were on a main trackway or a telegraph wire with fellows passing through and staying for a night from time to time. It's a terrible hard life for women-folk, don't make any mistake about that. My wife she's as good out of doors as she is in, she can ride and shoot; she has shot many a dingo, oh, yes. . . . It's a hard life, not like it is in the south where there are

trees and grass. I've been there too. The drought makes a difference: too much of an effort. Too much of an effort," he repeated vaguely. "Yet somebody has got to do it. Got to be done. The land has got to be taken up, and brought into cultivation. It's not so bad for them that follow. When there is wheat here, wheat all over the country and a railway line . . . prospering towns . . . prosperity . . ." he trailed off, muttering to himself.

Martin looked indifferently into the desert bush which encircled them on all sides. Beyond the fence which enclosed the garden and homestead, it was little changed. The only signs of man's handiwork were a few felled trees, some stacks of wood and a fence leading away into the distance. The desert horizon stretched blue and indefinite; it was the same as he had always known it, the dry trees growing in the dry soil, gnarled and bent, the blue leaves turned edgeways to the sun, the branches feathery and brittle, the twigs brittle and hard. The land was eternally old, it had always been thus, yet it possessed the innocence of youth. It was not yet aware of man's advent upon the world. It would not be changed; men might live here perhaps; already like so many ant-runs roads and trackways were being made, but like ant-runs these also would disappear in the dust. For himself he would survive for a while and at the end find space enough for a grave. And why had he come back to the bush? There was something to be found out. It was not only a matter of earning money and gaining power, though these in themselves were sound enough arguments. There was something else beyond, it was elusive and alluring. Oh, magically

alluring, outside his comprehension, yet filling his body with desire. . . . And this old man? Did he know anything of *that*? No, nothing at all, and he was surely a little cracked with his talk about wheat-fields and railway trains. . . . His improvements! Had these things value, Martin wondered, or were they merely out of place? He felt sorry for Mackay; he was a nice little old fellow; his wife was a strange sort of woman, and what could have induced him to marry her. Martin poked with a stick in a meditative fashion at a lizard crawling in the dust. It was strange how men and women should choose to live together in couples. His father and mother, they, too, had been an ill-assorted pair. . . .

That night he slept in the homestead, and, on closer acquaintance with Clara Mackay, he liked her better than at first. She did not go out of her way to make herself agreeable, and did not notice Martin beyond a few commonplace remarks. In her efficiency and her quiet manner she struck him as remarkable. At the evening meal the talk was of the farm and the details of management, which flocks of sheep and which mobs of bullocks were to be sold and which selected for breeding; it was the woman who made the final decisions.

The next morning they rose at sunrise and soon after were in the saddle and striking across country in the direction of the yet unfenced land where Martin was to work. They were riding three abreast when a small incident broke the bright harmony of the morning. Two of the dogs which were running beside the horses were playing together; one of them swerved suddenly under the hoofs of Mackay's horse.

The rider tried to pull the horse to one side, but was not able to prevent the dog being trodden upon. The dog lay yelping on the ground. Clara had become white in the face and seemed exasperated with an intense irritability. "You blasted old fool," she said, "can't you look where you are going? You might have killed the dog. Are you blind?" She jumped down, felt the dog all over, then finding that no bones were broken, released him.

Mackay's face contracted, but he did not speak. Clara remounted her horse, she was still tense with irritation. They rode for some distance without any exchange. Martin, who was amazed at the outburst, had fallen behind. It was Clara who at length broke the silence. "You know what it is," she said in a low voice. "I'm sorry, I can't help it." Mackay did not answer at once. He had shrunk into himself and become older and smaller.

"If you are going to sulk," she suddenly flared at him, "damn you for a silly old fool." She kicked her heels into her horse, gave a cut with her whip and went off at a gallop.

The two men rode forward, Martin keeping behind his employer for a while, but after a little distance his horse pulled level, and Martin could see that there were tears standing in the old man's eyes. He was muttering to himself, but the words were inaudible. After the first few seconds the monologue became definitely addressed to Martin, as if he found in this outlet a certain relief and consolation.

"It's the country, that's what it is . . . this infernal country. Women can't stand it. . . . I should have known that. If any woman could stand it, Clara

is the one. At work she's as good as a man. It's her nerves, they can't stand the loneliness, the isolation, the eternal repetition. With men it's somehow different. But they can't, not all of them, oh no. I dare say you have lived long enough, young fellow, to have found that out. . . . There must be pioneers, the first settlers. . . . A man can't live alone, not always. She and I are well fitted to the task. A fine station. It pays. Money comes in, though as yet it's chiefly sheep and fleeces." He fixed Martin with his blue eyes, and a light less despondant came into them. "If it were wheat, it would be a different story. A man doesn't feel so lonely where he can see the young, green leaves springing where the rain has fallen. And the rain would come, the climate would change, such things have happened. People would flock here then, there would be railways stretching out to the inland lakes beyond the breakaways. There would be branches from the Murchinson to the upper Gascoign, and beyond to the Pilbury district, and beyond again to Kimberley. There could be hundreds of miles of wheat, a wonderful country, rich enough to feed millions. You don't believe it?" he queried.

"Maybe," said Martin. It was best to humour the old fellow. He was obviously a bit cracked and so too was the woman, judging by the way she behaved. If they wanted wheat, why didn't they stay down south? There was plenty of wheat there and dull enough it looked, carpeting the whole country with its monotonous growth. A young man's scorn kindled in his heart. This poor old fool, good farmer that he was, did he think that he would really be able to change the desert?

"Do you think you could change it?" He was unable to conceal the scorn in his voice.

Mackay pulled in his horse, halted and looked about him. Beyond the immediate range of stunted bushes, there were others, and beyond them others that repeated themselves endlessly to the mauve horizon. There was no other feature save the strands of wire, stretched taut between Jarra uprights, which like a line ruled across the country lost itself in the distance behind and before.

"Perhaps not by me," said the older man after a pause, "but by some one," he added in a tone of returning confidence. "Why else should we come here? Why should we feel that we have got to come here if it wasn't for that? It isn't just for money. Money is easy to make."

"I'd rather leave it as it is. Why not?"

"That's just where you make a mistake," said Mackay incisively. "You will learn that in time. It's nature or man, one or other of them must go under. You must do her in her own hard way, or she'll crush you and have no pity. The progress of mankind can't stand still. You'll learn that when you are older."

Martin smiled in his superior confidence. They rode further, following the tautly-stretched wire.

II

Two days later, he had fairly started upon his new job. Jarra posts were already stacked in piles along the line where the new fences were to run. Martin made a start upon the first pile, and had dragged them to the positions they were to occupy. He found rolls

of barbed wire dropped at intervals along the way. The task before him was to dig holes and plant the posts firmly, then to stretch the wire, tautening it with a jack. There was plenty of material here to get on with, and in a few weeks' time, he would find that other posts and wire rolls were provided further out into the bush where the fence was to run. He would not return to the homestead as this would waste time, but had with him his food. A bag of flour swung from the bough of one of the larger bushes where it was comparatively safe from the attack of ants. Half a sheep, contained in a muslin bag, hung from the same bough. He had permission to shoot others as he should need. Besides flour and meat, he had fair-sized bags of tea and sugar, a dozen boxes of matches, and, what few bushmen are without, a packet of Epsom salts. These latter are considered indispensable in many districts of the North-west to counteract the strong mineral salts contained in the water. He had a rifle with cartridges, a large clasp-knife, a billy and frying-pan and a canvas water-bucket. He had two blankets in which to wrap himself at night and a couple of shirts; these and the clothes in which he stood were all the personal possessions necessary to the task. There were also tools for the work: an ax, a saw, hammer and nails, a brace and bit, wire cutters, a small jack, pick and shovel. Thus equipped he was prepared for as many months in the bush as it should need to complete his task. There was a water-hole within a mile, and as his work led him further into the unknown country, he would hope to find others at nearer intervals.

By the time he had been forty-eight hours alone, he

regained the deep sense of harmony with external nature, with which in his childhood he had been so familiar. This job was to his taste; it was what he had hoped for, and since he was paid by piece-work, he was free to regulate his own time for labour and rest.

Digging holes in the hard sub-soil of decaying granite in which to plant posts was hard work, yet there was delight in the physical toil under the sun, delight in the powerful play of shoulder and back muscles. Through the dry, heavy air, the sun blazed vertically upon his tanned and hardened skin. After such work there was rare pleasure in swallowing long draughts of tepid water from the bucket.

On the first evening, he took his rifle on the chance of picking up a bush-turkey and went out into the bush. It was dark when he returned, and the wheel-barrow birds, those twilight singers whose note is like the squeaking of an unoiled wheel, had ceased calling to one another. He made a fire and cooked his meat, boiled his billy of tea, then sat listening to all the little quiet noises which go to make up the great silence of the night. His thoughts went back over the past, and travelled the same ground as on the railway journey to Tharameka; but now he was a stage further, he was happier. He thought again of his sister, frowning involuntarily. He felt a certain regret for unacknowledged intolerance. He couldn't help things going wrong; it wasn't his fault. He knew the sort Godfrey was, it was strange that Mary should take up with a fellow like that. As he threw some more sticks on to the fire, he admitted that, after all, it was her own affair. He had been jealous, it was jealousy

that still hurt him. If it hadn't been for Mrs. Peppercorn things would have been worse, he felt sure of that. She had made him dig into himself, question his motives, and at last touch a larger consciousness. He remembered his first meeting with her, she had been walking on the beach with her husband. He had wondered who they were, seeing at once that they were different from the generality of Australians. They were English people, not long settled in the colony. Over in England she had been rich, the child of an old and wealthy family. How she had come to marry a poor man and to work on a farm Martin did not know; but she worked and worked well, far better indeed than her husband. Peppercorn was an easy-going, friendly fellow. Often he asked Martin to join him in shooting wallabies, and after these expeditions, Martin had gone back for supper to the little hessian hut where Peppercorn and his wife lived. These people were poor, but they were new to poverty. They were young and it had for them still the savour of an adventure. There were relics in that hut of their past life, which seemed to the boy full of wonder and glamour. There were cut-glass decanters and mirrors with gilt frames. The latter were hung on the bare, deal uprights, and had for background the stretched canvas which formed the walls of the hut.

It was owing to that attraction, which Martin had found so difficult to understand, that he had come to know Mrs. Peppercorn. His thoughts went back to her and to those clear evenings, when together they walked along the sands. He had found it difficult to speak about his trouble, but she had understood with-

out needing to have everything put into words. He saw now more clearly what she so unmistakably had seen at the time: it was his weakness, his lack of power; that was youth's chief ailment, and she had given him just the backing that he needed, had made him free from the futile sense of responsibility. He must make good for himself, that was the great thing that she had taught. On those evening walks along the sands by the sea's edge, he talked about his boyhood and about the bush. Because she had comprehended, she had sent him back to where heart and blood were calling. He must make good and gain for himself real power and manhood.

As now on his first evening of solitude, he gazed into the darkness over the red embers of his fire, he thanked her in his heart. In Mrs. Peppercorn he had had a glimpse of something a little different from the usual more primitive people of the bush. He was glad that in the world there were such women, wise and sympathetic. In the future, perhaps, when he had power and money, he would meet such a one. She would be worth waiting for.

Forms and memories of people whom he had known passed through his mind. There was Jane and Alec and Nance, his brothers and sister, his father and mother. And now poor old Mackay and Clara; he had been brought strangely and suddenly close to these people of whom he had known nothing but a week before. It was always thus in the bush: one came right up against people. For periods short or long they touched his life, and then like the gusty winds of mid-day passed further on their courses. Existence was no very ordered affair, it was com-

pounded of chance; for youth, at any rate, it was not fixed, but rather an ever-changing pattern. He reflected that there was not one human being whose life was intimately connected with his own, and he himself was not dependent upon any one. . . . There was the bush . . . that was different from men, it was both primal and ultimate. No time nor hazard could take from him its assurance. He glanced up at the sky; against it he could see the boughs of an over-arching gum-tree; there were the fine divisions of twigs, the long, lenticular leaves, swaying gently to some upper movement of air.

He lay down upon the ground, which was still warm from the sunlight. He pulled his blankets close, knowing that later it would be cold. His boots served as a pillow. And now he let his thoughts run into the future. There were all those posts to be driven, miles of wire to be stretched. It would be wonderful work, accomplished all by himself. . . . There would be a long succession of such nights . . . of dawns, too . . . the waking of birds in the morning, their early songs, the faint chirpings of flocks of little birds flitting from bush to bush. There would be the kindling of the morning fire in the hush of sunrise, the knowledge of the aloof yet intimate land, vast upon all sides, and later the sweating, monotonous labour under the sun, the slow increase of money, money which was power and which would accumulate. . . . Mackay had ambitious ideas about fencing; the work would last months, a year, perhaps longer, and all the while he would be near to that *something*, that strange intangible something for which he had no name. He knew that it was present in the bush, and

that it promised a beyond greater even than life itself. It was the charm, the lure, the pride of life, yet words did not describe it. He had no use or feeling for words and was happier silent. He looked up at the stars overhead, and felt that they too must form a part of that ultimate happiness.

These were mere fancies of half-sleep, half-waking; it was easy and delicious to let himself drift into unconsciousness.

III

As weeks and months went forward, solitude closed upon the boy. Labour in isolation became a habit. It seemed that he had always lived thus; time was infinitely long, and yet the days passed shortly, quickly. At first there was simple happiness, a translucent satisfaction. The irritabilities of existence vanished, all that he now experienced ministered to the universal rather than the individual elements of his nature. The work became automatic, a repetition of the same operations day after day. There was the breaking of the decayed granite with the pick point, the digging of the hole, the planting firmly of the posts with measured interval between, the stretching of the wire, the making of it firm and fast. The fence grew, and for a time it was the only material sign which connected him with the other members of his race; it led back, over the ground that he had trod, to civilization and to other men. Martin became fond of this thing that he had made; he liked to think of it leading always further out into the untracked bush. Every three days he would move his materials forward and find a new camping place. To find sufficient

water was his greatest concern. Through long practice he had learnt the signs which indicate the presence of water-holes; like other bushmen he was subconsciously aware of the hidden springs, and instinctively was guided to where he might find them.

During all this time he was in very good health, his muscles hardened under the regular unstrained work. He was free to take his own leisure, and in the evenings and occasionally for whole days he would go wandering out into the bush. He would take his rifle and would stalk the wily, the very wily, bush-turkey, who seemed, in spite of his isolated life, to know all about guns and men, and who, when he "froze," was so like a dead tree-stump that nine out of ten hunters would pass him by. Bush-turkey was excellent eating and a welcome change from the monotonous mutton and damper.

Once on his wanderings, he came into a region of high ant-hills. These phallic-like structures were raised sometimes to a height of eight or ten feet; they were often two or three feet in diameter, and were made of a cement, very hard in texture, of finely-powdered red dust. A strange effect they had, clustered in groups over the plain. They emphasized the unhuman quality of the land. Here, without doubt, the white ants, and in each nest there were hundreds of thousands of them, were the most noticeable inhabitants, they were the only architects and builders. This region belonged to them. And each nest or city, how wonderful it was with its network of corridors and tunnels, the hard frame work of the tower, and the silent, restless population that built so mighty an edifice! Martin, fascinated by their movements, wasted

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a whole day watching the different shaped members of their community as they ran along the grooved passages and in and out of their tunnels.

As he wandered in the desert, he would say words to himself, wondering at the empirical values given to sounds. His own name, for instance, after he had repeated it often enough, became meaningless, a mere empty resonance: Martin, Martin . . . martin, martin, martin, . . . tin, tin, tin, . . . martin. . . . Any quality that remained was certainly other than that of earlier associations. It was so with all words, they became meaningless by repetition. He muttered words over and over; like all dwellers in solitude, he talked to himself. Yet when he was most happy, most clearly conscious, he remained silent: words were an impediment, thoughts even seemed an obstruction. On such occasions he would stand quite still, gazing perhaps at some branch or at the earth at his feet. His mind was vacant, clean and very wide for reception; there was a kind of nothingness outside him and within also. He would smile softly to himself; in a little he would tremble, and strange, sudden tears would come into his eyes. He would shake them away and look round at the innocent, uninhabited land. It had come nearer to him in those moments of oblivion. As if by contact with its very heart, his own blood became warmer, his own heart trembled and his eyes, now clear and bright, stared wonderingly into the distance; the secret had been partly communicated.

IV

There were intervals when the solitude was broken. The first visitor to his camp was Clara. After three

weeks, she came driving the buggy across open country. For a long time before he saw her he could hear the approaching horse-hoofs and the grinding of the wheels. He broke off from his work, mildly and pleasantly excited. When he saw Clara, he was pleased; he had not expected her and was curious why she had come. He watched in silence as she approached.

She nodded to him as she jumped down from the buggy. "I've struck your locality pretty well," she said, "not bad for a guess at a cross-country drive." He walked to where she had halted. She indicated the back of the buggy and began to unhitch the tail-board. "You'll find a bag of flour which should carry you on for some time, and there are some tins of meat, which I dare say will come in handy, and a few other odd things."

Martin grinned, the prospect of a change of diet was pleasant.

"Oh, pretty well, thank you." His own voice in conversation with another had for him a strange sound. He went to the back of the cart and lifted the bag of flour on to his shoulder. Clara was watching him critically. She did not speak but took a cigarette from her case, lit it and began to smoke. It seemed as if both of them were shy of breaking the silence of their solitude. Martin dumped the flour beside his other possessions and returned to the cart. He pulled out several tins of corned-beef and other edibles. "Thank you for this stuff," he said, "I shall like this."

"Well, now tell me how do you like it out here all alone."

"Oh, pretty fair."

"Not sick of it?"

"No."

She closed her eyes for a second and her mouth curled in a sour smile. She shrugged her shoulders. "You can tie the horse to one of the posts," she said. She turned from him and began to stroll back along the fence that he had made. She stayed now and then to examine the work.

She returned after a while. "You get the posts firmly bedded, but I doubt whether you have fastened the wire strongly enough. The change of temperature puts a fair strain on it. It pulls out sometimes."

"I reckon it's firm enough," said Martin, "I've jerked on it hard."

While this interchange of remarks was taking place, they watched each other, questioning, but not deeply, only with a vague, superficial curiosity.

"Do you find it lonely?" asked Clara.

"Oh ay, but I don't mind that."

"Have you seen no one all the time you've been here?"

"Not since the boss left."

She shrugged her shoulders and laughed. "I couldn't stand it. It's awful, this country." She spoke with a sudden bitterness. "A beastly, empty, barren country. Why not even grass will grow, and no wonder. . . . It's not fit for any white man to live in . . . all right for niggers perhaps. It isn't only the sight of it but the feel of it, that's what's so damnable. One can shut one's eyes but not one's feelings. . . . It's like a nightmare," she added and seemed suddenly to become relaxed, suddenly flaccid. "It is a

nightmare; it's in my sleep, I dream of it . . . the red dust and the infernal insects. . . . The flies, look at them, how filthy they are, crawling everywhere, all over one's clothes.

"Why do you come here?" asked Martin.

"Ask *him*," she said bitterly; "he can tell you, no doubt." She looked away, then back, meeting his questioning, candid eyes. "There's a good living to be made; it's a fine station no doubt. It's attractive enough from the outside, a good proposition." She smiled queerly and in a hard voice added, "I'm the sort of woman that's well fitted for this kind of life."

"Don't you like it at all? There must be part of it you like."

"Oh yes, there is that. You mustn't mind what I say. . . . I don't know. . . . I can't help it. . . . If he wanted to give it up, perhaps I wouldn't let him. I don't know. . . . Oh yes, I would though if he got as far as that. By God, yes, and never let him come back." She paused for a few moments and then in a more controlled voice: "It's nice to feel the place going well, it's prospering. That's what keeps one here, I suppose. But where's it going to end? I don't think there is any end to it. We are taking up new land now. . . . That's all out-of-pocket expense. It will pay in the long run, no doubt. . . . It's easy to make money for people like us; we'd prosper anywhere. . . . The more one succeeds, the more tied one is, the more impossible it is to get away. It gets a hold on one, a hold that gets tighter and tighter." She looked round at the encircling blue distance with fear and hostility. "He

thinks he can bring it under cultivation, but he's wrong. He doesn't see, he doesn't understand. . . . Why, think for yourself, think of the people you've known. Are not they all lured on, don't they all get done in sooner or later? Perhaps you haven't seen much yet, but I have. I've seen and I know. It's like a lure tempting one on . . . to destruction. Yes one can put up fences, put cattle on the land, sell so many hundred fleeces . . . but what's the end of it?"

Martin remained unmoved by this outburst. Men in their first youth are not easily moved to pity, but he was objectively interested in this woman and willing to provoke her to more talk. Her mentality was so different from his own; that was perhaps why he felt no pity. "Mr. Mackay talks about acres of wheat," he said. In his voice there was a note of mild sarcasm.

"Look at it, feel it," she cried, stamping her foot. "It's a rock, barren dust. He talks like that, he has only one kind of imagination; people talk like that in the city, in the colonizing advertisements. They come here believing what *might* be and what *ought* to be; they don't see what *is*. . . . And even if it were so, why should one's life and everything be sacrificed to a field of wheat? He believes in pioneering . . . let him sacrifice himself, he has a right to do that."

Although Martin had provoked her to speak on, he felt now embarrassed, ashamed both for himself and for the unhappiness of this woman. "Why don't you clear out?" he said rather brutally. "What's the good of staying if you hate it so much?"

"You ask me that; it's not so easy to answer. You have only been here three weeks. I've been here

three years. Ask him, if you want to know." Then somewhat inconsequently: "What's the use of talking? One has to like this sort of place if one is to be happy here."

"Some do, I guess."

"Oh yes, no doubt, some do." She looked up, drawing in her breath sharply through her teeth. "One forgets even how to talk, one can only wrangle. That's the hell of a place like this, it spoils one's temper. I've seen it with others just the same. Do you think I don't know it hasn't spoilt me? That it will drive me mad. I know all about that. . . . I wish to God I'd never come." She scratched petulantly in the dust with the toe of her boot, then after a pause she asked: "Have you been in the mining towns when the chaps were going through to a new find on the gold-fields?"

"A place like Tharameka?"

"Yes, that's the sort of thing, that's all one has to escape to. You've seen it? It's worse than this. I'd rather stay in the bush."

Martin shook his head. "I would not care to live in any town," he said.

She looked at him in silence, half scornfully, half envious. If he could not understand, what was the good of talking; he was merely an inexperienced boy. It was just the vacuity of youth that could endure this loneliness, or was there something else, some power that she sensed but could not quite comprehend? "I'm stopping your work," she said.

"That can wait. It's nice talking, it's real good of you to bring me those stores."

She turned away disgusted at the necessity for words

that had been upon her. She had not meant to talk in this manner, and hated herself for showing herself so unadorned. What she had said did not now appear to her as even sincere, not wholly sincere, but only so far in that her words voiced her discord; they were an expression of her discontent, like all else, within and without, born of the desert dust, the flies and the heat.

She stayed but a short time longer; they spoke now of the technicalities of his work, how far he was to go forward before turning, where the sawn poles were stacked and where wire was dumped. She would not stay with him and share his meal, but seemed impatient to be off.

He put the horse in the buggy, and there was something in the hot, familiar smell of the animal which gave him a twinge and an ache as of homesickness. Perhaps, after all, he *was* a bit lonely out there in the bush by himself. As he watched the buggy drive away, he was sorry that he had not made better acknowledgment for the tins of beef and the molasses, then as he turned back towards the unfinished fence he was glad that she had gone and had taken with her that poignant sense of discord and discontent.

V

A band of wandering natives were the next human beings that broke upon his solitude. They appeared one mid-day straggling in a long line across the country. First came the men with their long, slender spears, their throwing-sticks and boomerangs. They came in little groups, each group moving in single-file, each separated by some distance from the next. Af-

ter the men came the women and children, the women carrying upon heads and shoulders the paraphernalia of the camp. When the leaders came in sight, they diverged from their course. They halted at a little distance, watching the white man at his work, talking to one another, making gestures. In a little time the women joined them, so that the long, straggling line became a close-grouped bunch of men and women. Martin felt a little uneasy. Some of the men were wild-looking fellows, and he had been told that the natives of that district were not always very friendly to white men. He had heard gossip in Tharameka of the slaying of white men in revenge for outrages committed in far distant regions: a rough justice regulated by the old principle of a life for a life. Yet these men did not seem hostile though they were excited and were talking in loud tones. He stood watching, wondering what their talk and gestures might signify; he waved to them, but getting no response, shouted in the native dialect, which he remembered well enough from his boyhood, asking for water. . . . This he did partly as a sign of friendship, partly to forestall the request. He knew from experience that wandering natives were only too likely to ask for water, and he did not want to render up his small store, which he had carried some distance.

They seemed assured at hearing their own language. The leading men advanced and in a short while they had gathered in a group about him. Martin repeated his request. They shook their heads, they had no water, but by and by they would show him where water could be had. For the present they were occupied in examining his tools. These they handled

with a kind of surprised reverence. Very gently they picked them up, looked at them and passed them to a neighbour. They clicked their tongues, and now and then a man would smack his thigh as a sign of marvel and wonder. With the ingenuousness of children, they requested that he should give them these wonderful tools. Martin shook his head; his earlier knowledge of natives came in useful. He clipped off some short lengths of wire. These he distributed among the brown outstretched hands. These children of the bush were easily satisfied; they were delighted with their gifts. Passing them from hand to hand, they seemed quite to forget their more exorbitant demands.

Before long they discovered his store of food. He gave them portions of meat and flour, a small inadequate supply, but all he could afford. They made fires and cooked food that they had with them, and in the evening were ready to continue their journey. Martin went with them some distance on their way; they showed him a good water-hole, nearer and with better water than he had hitherto used. When they parted it was on good terms, the natives laughing and gesticulating, assuring him that they would come back some time and see him again. When he got back to camp, Martin found that in his absence one of them must have slunk back and stolen all his sugar. This was a serious loss, but then, he reflected, they might have taken everything. They were not bad fellows, all things considered. It was easy to sympathize with their wandering, wild life. If any one knew the desert, these men did. They were the real children of the land, primitive, unadorned, cheerful and unpreten-

tious. They were utterly different from white men, in some ways superior, he reflected; they were certainly gentler and less fierce. Had they been white men, who had found a stranger of a strange race thus trespassing on their land, they would certainly have taken all that he possessed; they would probably have cut his throat into the bargain and left his body for the red crows to pick over.

These poor fellows were like children, simple and trusting, unable to protect themselves. He had seen to what low uses they were put by the whites; yet they lived where white men and white women found it difficult to live. They had lived in the desert and had passed on their simple tradition from generation to generation. They went back to the beginning of human life and seemed little changed by the long passage of years. How well, too, their naked bodies and ugly faces, the liquid and guttural noises of their speech were harmonious to the desert noises. In some subtle way these qualities were in accord with the dry, clear air, the powdery dust of the soil, the rude gusts of wind during the mid-day heat, the silence of dawn and of dusk broken by the occasional, plaintive whistle of birds. These things were harmonious, gendering a sympathy for the brown, nomad people.

Chapter 3: *Solitude*

I

TIME passed; one day followed another with a tranquil regular harmony. Time, like the surrounding desert seemed infinitely extended. Each diurnal unit passed humbly and without acclamation into that sea of memory which was the past. The fence grew longer, and the solitary youth, finding a pride in his strength of muscle and in his accomplished task, worked his way still further into solitude. In the early dawn before sunrise, he lay wrapped in his blankets looking up at the fading stars. As the sun rose over the horizon with the inevitable, swift course of the earth's revolution, he also rose, stretched and shook himself. There was the task of kindling the fire, of boiling his billy of tea and breaking fast. Then while the sun was still low in the east, moving out to his work, surveying the accomplished task of the preceding day, he would smile and talk to himself. Mechanically, almost like an automaton, he would work, and while he worked his thoughts moved vaguely amidst strange dimly-imagined worlds. Sometimes they would go back into the past, sometimes slide forward into the nebulous drift of the future. He dreamed while he worked and the dreams of adolescence, half mystical, half romantic, were of women, those half-divinities of the human race, different from and better than men. They floated in

the fresh sunlight of his dreams, but they were on the earth, too, as he had known them, limited and inadequate. Experience had shown them imperfect as men were imperfect. He despised them as less hardy to endure physical labour. He believed, too, that because they were weak and soft and yielding they were the natural prey for the desires of men. He had seen that; in a town such as Tharameka the brutalities of sex are not disguised. Women were to be overcome and mastered. . . . Yet a woman might be worshipped; the rosy-coloured sunshine of his dream claimed at least one extravagant exception. One woman would satisfy those vague desires, she would be the symbol of life and its unspoken creeds. He had no standard for comparison, but vaguely he believed that he would find her, single her out from amidst the ranks of her inferior sisters . . . and then? Ah well, there was life . . . the farm that he was going to buy, the prosperity and happiness that he was going to find. . . . They would find it together. His thoughts were undefined about that distant future and played in fancies round that not impossible girl, part goddess and part warm, elemental creature fit to meet with reciprocal passion the ardours and longings of youth.

The sun, casting down its shafts of heat and light, would climb higher in the sky till it would hang vertically overhead. At mid-day came the wild gusts. Narrow lanes of wind would come roaring by, breaking the mulga-bushes, whirling branches aloft, stirring the red dust to an impenetrable cloud. These currents of air, no more sometimes than a few yards in width, turned and swayed like swift-moving snakes. They

would lift in spirals high into the sky, carrying upward a red pillar to blur and obscure the sunlight. Until the evening the sun beat down with no abatement of intensity, and through the long day, with few intervals, the boy worked with the same slow, automaton-like endurance. The sweat, glistening in beads on his tanned face and arms, swiftly evaporated in the dry air. But when, at last, the sun sank westward, he would pause to light his evening fire. He cooked his meat. This he looked forward to as a pleasant occupation, and the meal was eaten with strong appetite. After his body was satisfied with food, he would sit by the fire listening to the birds, which now gave their irregular, sharp calls. The branches against the evening sky showed clear and distinct. Sometimes his body would seem as if swayed by some unheard, unseen rhythm, his senses would pass into a coma. He would become empty of thought and volition, an empty vessel through which the quality of the desert flowed and flowed on. He would wake shivering with the evening cold, beside the burnt-out ashes of his fire. Then, wrapped in his blanket, he would lie on the bare earth and gaze into the night.

Thus the days passed to the slow rhythm of an eternal tide. The youth no longer counted them in their flight. The strands of wire and the jarra uprights of the fence were the only material things which held him to his fellow-men and to his place as a man among the members of his race.

II

Mackay's visits were not frequent, though there were occasions when he came to see how his new

fence was growing. He brought from time to time materials and food. Not much had he spoken with Martin, and only once had they come to grips in intimate conversation. It was a matter for the most part of short question and answer. As if afraid of mental quicksands which might be discovered, Mackay had kept to the hard rock of material fact; it was against his instincts to venture where the unknown ground might slip suddenly away. Once he had asked, half in a spirit of rough compassion and half from curiosity: "Would you like a change of work to something nearer the house, something less lonely?"

Martin had considered and paused. "No," he had said, "I'll carry on here. I like the work."

"You are the man to make my fences," said Mackay, looking at him rather dubiously. "It isn't every one who'll take this sort of a job. There's a lot of new land to be fenced. I can keep you going for a long time yet."

"How long is it I've been working?"

"I don't know to the day, I shall have to look it up: about six months."

Martin continued his work in silence, then he said, "In another six months perhaps I should like a change. I shall go to Perth maybe."

"You will have had enough of it? Well, I can't say I'm surprised."

"No, I'd like to come back if you have work for me."

"There's plenty of work, no lack of work here for years to come." Mackay ended on a note that was a little dubious. "I shall be here for good or bad. I can't turn back. I'm stuck here."

"Ay," said Martin and gazed at his companion steadily. Then abruptly he asked: "Why do you come here if you don't like it?" It was the same question that he had asked Clara. Well, he would ask the man now and see what he would say. He didn't wait though for an answer, but went on: "I've been thinking while I have been here by myself, and wondering why people come here if they don't like it. Either it gets hold of one or it doesn't. One or the other, it must be."

Mackay was leaning back against his new wire fence, his arms were stretched out on either side of him along the top strand. He looked at Martin for some moments without speaking, then he nodded his head. Now that they were spoken, he found that he did not resent these crude interrogations. They and their answers which somehow he must produce were the natural due, reciprocal in that solitude, from one man to another. "Do you think any one likes anything completely and altogether?" he asked evasively. "Or dislikes any manner of life completely, for that matter, either?"

Martin did not need to consider for his answer. He was occupied at that moment in straightening a stiff piece of wire. He was doing it slowly, elaborately, his faculties were intensely occupied with the issue of this question that he had put to the older man. This was something of a conflict between youth and age, and he used the wire and the strong muscles of his hands as accessory forces, holding his mind close to the physical reality of youth and strength. When he spoke he looked straight at Mackay, meeting those blue and wistful eyes. The dreams of fancies

of his adolescence gave, if not convincing weight, then a ring of fervour to his words. "Yes, I know what I like."

Mackay's glance shifted to somewhere beyond Martin's shoulder and settled upon the distance. "Even when you *possess* what you desire?" he said as if speaking to himself.

Martin furrowed his brow, he was not sure what Mackay meant. "I don't know," he said, and with a quick movement bent the wire double.

Mackay looked quickly at the boy, and the lines about his mouth and eyes multiplied into a smile. "I haven't answered your question," he said slowly. "I don't *quite* know why I've come here, or why I stay here, or whether I like it or not. I used to know all these things when I was young. Now I don't know . . . one goes on. That's how it is. One thing's as good as another. You'll find that a man is not able to change about as his fancy moves."

"I shan't want to," said Martin defiantly.

"No . . . perhaps not. I see you are a good sticker."

A sense of irritation was in the youth at this vague conversation. There was a quiet irony in the older man that galled his pride. It was an irony which extended towards all life, including the speaker himself, his own failures and aspirations. . . . Why then should he have talked with such a crazed enthusiasm about wheat, acres of wheat? What then did he and his woman believe in? Was there anything that they believed in or did they drift aimlessly? That couldn't be it. Martin would like to have shaken him to make him definite. "It's quite plain," he said. "I either

like a thing or I don't. I like this job well enough, and I like the country; it's what I've been used to."

Mackay nodded acquiescing. A faint smile was on his lips. He made as if to speak and checked himself. Then he spoke, but it was clear that he had changed his mind, and had suppressed what he was about to say. "You've tackled me hard," he said, smiling. "I don't resent it. "It's the way out here, this questioning: questioning oneself. Sooner or later one wants to get to the bottom. I wonder if any man ever will. . . ." He left his thought rather vague, and then went on, "My wife, as I dare say you've seen, doesn't like this life. She likes it and she dislikes it, if you understand. She's well fitted for it, you see, and in one way she's not fitted for it at all. I've thought sometimes of giving it all up, the farm and all I've done to it. . . . It would grieve me. It's a useful life, so I believe. . . . It *must* be useful . . . opening up the country, the spread of civilization. There must be pioneers, and we do the job better than most. A man mustn't change at every whim of a woman's fancy. . . . Not that she would have me change. Yet she would sometimes," he added abstractedly. Martin was listening, anxious to hear more. Mackay continued in a firmer tone. "The land's here. I've set my print on it. It's only a matter of time for the money to come in. . . . What else am I to do? I couldn't bear idleness, and I'm too old now to start again." He paused, and then as if indeed he might expect an answer: "What am I to do?" The question came wrenched from his heart, slowly, reluctantly. Because there was no answer he went on speaking: "I like the life, a great

part of it. . . . It has its charm," he added with a wan smile.

Martin was ashamed of his sudden pity; he felt ashamed of words, all he could find to say was to repeat: "It has its charm."

"And its danger," said Mackay slowly. "It's dangerous for men to live long in the desert . . . a dangerous thing. One has to go to the bottom and fish up everything that's lying there. That's where the trouble is. The air's too clear. The words count too much as you let them fall. Do you understand that? One gets too close; there's nothing between, that's the danger."

For all his confidence Martin was a little shaken; it was as if some shadow had blown up out of the future. This was the mist and dampness of age. He had made Mackay speak, now he wanted to stop him from saying anything else. This troublous probing and questioning was not decent, yet he himself questioned why the trouble should be. Why not live simply? To his youthful vision the waters of life were clear to the very bottom. He dropped the piece of wire which was now quite straight without a kink in it. "It's bloody hot standing here in the sun." Then awkwardly, "You'll stay and take food before you go back?"

Mackay straightened himself. "Yes, I'll stay and sample your cooking. I can ride back when it's a bit cooler." He looked intently at the young man and with a certain defiance. He was not to be pulled back quite so abruptly into the commonplace world. "You are young, young fellow. You are a good stickler, and no doubt think yourself a lot wiser than

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an old man like me. Well, I give you a word of advice: When you begin to throw things overboard, don't throw everything at once. Hold on. Stick to what you are doing. It's better not to change more things than you can help. Work and perseverance has saved more men than anything else. That's what I've found. When you don't quite know where you are inside, keep the outside things going. Don't throw everything at once." Mackay was flushed, almost angry.

Martin was unabashed, he seemed almost indifferent. He did not perceive that this was the saving principle upon which Mackay himself floated in a world disintegrating in that limpid solitude. He nodded brusquely and smiled. "I shall hold on to everything," he said.

III

More time has passed. Martin has finished his fence; he has gone to Tharameka, has mingled once more with the crowd of men and women coming and going to and from the gold fields. He drifted for some days about those squalid streets, and then returned again to the homestead. Why he should have made this expedition into the town he did not explain to himself, though he was aware that he was in quest of a woman, some one woman of his imagination: she was not exactly like Nance, though in many ways she resembled her, she had grown different and possessed a life of her own. During the days of solitude in the bush he had dreamed and talked to himself about this girl that he would meet. He liked to picture her lonely, wide-eyed and expectant, stand-

ing amid those feathery, sweet-scented bushes, waiting for him. It was but a dream, one of the unrealities of adolescence; in the wilds there are no women, they live elsewhere. . . . And so he had gone to Tharameka. There he had seen some Japanese prostitutes and queues of men waiting at their doors. One or two other women he had seen, but they were not as he had imagined, they seemed brutalized and vulgarized by the town. Then, because of a sudden longing for the bush, a desire to be once more amid familiar sights and sounds, he returned to Quinn's Springs.

Mackay had been willing enough to give him work; there were more fences to be made, and mobs of cattle were pasturing over what had been empty land. Martin was now a tried hand and could stay as a permanent worker should he wish to remain in so isolated an outpost. As the months passed the restlessness of adolescence grew stronger; it was in disharmony with the deep love for the bush which had grown up with his childhood. His soul remained for the time passive, the urgencies of life moved under the surface, they did not break out; as if under a charm, he waited for the monotony of that solitude to be broken. It was stretched like a silver wire, very taut and vibrating slightly. Half-consciously he knew that something would happen. . . . He would wait. Perhaps that girl would really appear before him, or perhaps he would go and find her. . . . He would stay for a little longer. He was earning money; every day he added to what he had saved. Money meant, in the world of men, power. If he was to be a man he must have power, and so with an inborn faith he waited

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and worked, trusting that the charm would break.

For the most part he worked amid the solitude to which he had grown accustomed. It is a curious thing that in wild places where men might be expected to group together, they live unto themselves; they think their own thoughts and talk to themselves rather than to each other. From time to time he saw his employers, and sometimes he saw passing tribes of natives; there were white men, too, that on rare occasions came to Quinn's Springs, but with these he did not speak much until one day he fell in with two sandal-wood cutters. It was these men who broke the monotony; they broke the chain that held him to the bush, and sent him down to Perth to seek those vaguely-imagined adventures.

These men made camp with him for two days, then passed on further into the wilderness. For some hours before he saw them, he heard the ring of their axe-strokes. He had an impulse to go and investigate that unusual noise, but he held on mechanically in the grip of his work. The younger of the two strangers first came into view. He was not much older than Martin. His tanned skin was freckled, and his red hair, on which he wore no covering, had gone on the top almost white, bleached by the sun. They were in sight of each other for some time before they spoke. The stranger was seeking for and cutting down sandal-wood bushes, dragging the cut wood to a central pile, and Martin, for his part, continued to stretch the pale strands of wire, fastening them to the newly-planted posts.

After Martin had seen the pile of cut wood grow to some size, the stranger looked round, straightened

himself and walked casually to where Martin was working. The two young men stood looking at each other. They were much of the same height and of the same complexion; the desert had laid its mark definitely and unmistakably.

It was some seconds before either of them spoke.

"A long, slow job, eh?" said the stranger, nodding at the fence, which went back over the way that Martin had come and which disappeared amidst the scrub.

"Ay, it reaches some distance."

"Are there cattle here yet?"

"Not in this part."

"That's as well for chaps that walk on foot. A mob of cattle can be an ugly thing to meet."

"I know. I had a friend killed that way."

"Killed," repeated the stranger, his brow contracting into the slightest frown. He shrugged his shoulders, then after a short pause: "I suppose you camp near here."

"Yes, by those trees, that's my new camping-place."

"You got good water?"

"Yes."

"My mate's not far off. You can hear his axe. We'll come back tonight." The stranger nodded. Their eyes met for a moment, and because of their mutual youthfulness and of a certain candour which was the gift of the desert, they were glad of this meeting, though it was far from their inclination to express this feeling in words.

The three men met for their evening meal. Loo Radcliffe was an elderly man, somewhere about the fifties, though what his age was it was difficult to guess,

he might have been very much older. He was so withered by long exposure to the desert heat and so covered with red dust that he was like the gnarled stem of a mulga-bush. He spoke little, but from time to time muttered to himself. John Sherwin, the younger man, was in the prime of his youth, but neither in years nor in experience did he seem so young as Martin. About his mouth and eyes were lines of discontent and of a latent, unexpressed anger. This hardening of his expression was perhaps in the process of passing away; the clemency of that unpeopled and innocent land, of the open sun-lit sky was softening what in a townsman would have become set in bitterness.

Not many words passed while they prepared and ate their meal; accustomed to silence and solitude they had no need of words. They spoke of the material things that concerned their life, everything else was taken for granted. Each man knew that the others must walk in the same path as he himself, which was the path of survival in a land where it was difficult for men to survive.

Radcliffe, perhaps because he was the eldest, was the most reticent. He had known the desert for many years, there was hardly anything left for him to say. He was concerned to know what water-holes were to be found, where sandal-wood bushes grew most plentifully. After he had spoken of these things, he smoked his pipe and listened to the conversation of the younger men.

They talked about the animals that were good to eat, about bush-turkeys, kangaroos and emues. Sherwin told how he and his companion wandered over large areas collecting and heaping together piles of

the cut sandal-wood, and how later they came with a cart to gather up what they had stored. There was a sale for it in Tharameka, from whence it went to the coast. He had heard that it was used in China, burnt in temples, some sort of worship he believed. About this latter he was vague; being outside the range of their experience, it had small interest for either of these men. They did not converse, but spoke in short question and answer with intervals between. Their most interesting topic was of the foods that they ate. Martin related how his sugar had been stolen by natives, how he had had to go without till his next store had been brought from Quinn's Springs; but of that intimate communion with the desert, of which all men who would survive there must partake, they did not speak; their bodily well-being was sufficient evidence.

As the light faded, the barking of dingoes sounded from far away. Sherwin jerked his head in their direction. "Have you seen them about here?" he asked.

"Once or twice, but not often. They are shy. They've been close. They steal anything. The meat I throw away, it soon disappears. They don't leave it to rot."

Radcliffe, who had been sitting in silence, chuckled and took his pipe from his mouth. "Years ago there used to be more of them slinking creatures, but bold enough, too, when they are hungry. I've seen one creep up to the dead body of a sheep. It slunk along the ground from bush to bush; it crawled and wriggled like a snake, crawled with ears clapped back to its head. Looked like a yellow lizard. I hadn't a gun or I could have shot the brute."

They were silent for a short time listening to the distant yowls and yaps. Loo spoke again. "I had a boot stolen once, that was before I knew better. . . . I sleep with them under my head now. A dingo took it, though it wasn't but a yard off. I found the sole and the heel next morning, half a mile away. It was all slobbered over with tooth-marks . . . every bit of soft leather eaten away." The narrator let a long interval pass; neither of the young men made any comment. Martin had a picture of the yellow, lizard-like dog, stretched flat to the earth, creeping up to the sleeping man. "I was in a fix that time," continued Loo. "Had to walk back fourteen miles to get another pair of boots. I sleep with them under my head now. They make a good pillow."

After another long interval Sherwin queried: "Can your boss find good water for stock out this way?"

"Ay," said Martin, "plenty of water underground. With a few wells and pumps one could run some big mobs."

Loo put his pipe back in his mouth, he had told his story as he had told it many times before, and was now finished with conversation. In the silence of the gathering night, each man followed his own line of thought; each, separate and solitary, was held in the grip of his individual life. They were silent because they were met together in company; had they been alone they would have talked, babbling to themselves.

Loo took off his boots, regarded them fixedly for some moments. He put them together and laid them as a pillow. The three men separated, wrapped themselves in their blankets and slept.

IV

The next morning, Martin took his rifle and went with Sherwin to look for bush-turkeys. They soon separated and made parallel tracks, keeping within sight or sound of one another. Towards mid-day they came together for their meal and for a rest during the principal heat. Martin had enjoyed his morning's hunt, he had shot a turkey and was pleased with himself. It was a novel pleasure to feel that he was working with another man, pleasant to rest and eat in company.

A few weeks ago rain had fallen, and in places there were patches of the frail, dry-petaled flowers that bloom in the bush. The air was fragrant with their honey-sweet scent. The two young men rested under the boughs of wattles and looked out from their shelter upon hard sunlight and upon the white and pink upturned faces of flowers. They were glad to rest for a while, though each would have been willing at a suggestion to continue the hunt.

"Have you been long in this part?" asked Martin.

"About twelve months."

"Where do you come from? Were you born out here?"

"I wasn't born on the mainland, on an island."

"Do you come from Europe like my father? He came from England."

"No, from not far, just across the water, a little way."

They were silent for some time. They found it hard to talk to one another. Their solitary lives had not fitted them for conversation.

"What made you come away from where you were?"

"It was a little island. There was no one there but father and mother." Another silence. Martin waited, hoping that his companion might tell him something of the motive which made him leave the place where he was born. Sherwin frowned slightly as he spoke. "Father didn't want me to go. I had a business about that. I had to go. I couldn't stay with them."

"No," said Martin.

"I wanted to see other folk." Sherwin's frown deepened a little. He paused for a while, then he smiled, and looking away at the waves of heat, which at a little distance curled into fantastic shapes and merged into the false-water of the desert, he continued as if more to himself than to his companion: "It was women, I suppose. I wanted to meet women. That was why. I couldn't have put it like that at the time, but that was why."

"Women," said Martin, surprised at his own temerity in uttering the word. "There are not many women in these parts."

"No, not many."

Again there was silence.

"Are they like what you thought?"

"No, they are better than that and worse, different altogether."

With a sudden restless movement, Martin plucked one of the white, brittle flower-heads. He looked at it discontentedly and let it drop. "Not many in these parts," he repeated.

"There are some sorts it's best to get away from. They are different, women are. Different from each

other, more different than you'd imagine," said Sherwin significantly.

"They are difficult to understand," said Martin with a conviction rising from the depth of his small experience.

"Yes, by God, they are, but I'll tell you something that I've found. They want a man to be a man and not a boy. They want him to have money, power, position . . . to be able to do as he wants, to *do* things. And it isn't only that, they will go back and cling to what they are accustomed to. And they are brave in their way, they will bear things, any amount of pain, but they lack courage for doing things. They will lie down rather than stand up and fight. They'll promise things, but they don't keep promises, they can't go against their nature. They will lie down if a man cracks a whip. Then if you are sorry for them, they will love you for it . . . or say they do."

He broke off abruptly. "Why talk about women? Isn't this place good enough without them? I came here to get away. A man can get along without women, don't you think?"

"I don't know," said Martin.

"What if he can't. . . . Perhaps not for very long. I don't know. There are no women here. I'm all right, so is old Loo. He doesn't want women, do you think?" Since Martin did not say anything, he went on with his philosophizing, glad of this opportunity of having his thought checked by the presence of another. "It's easy to believe that it's best to take what you can get. Perhaps it is, but it isn't much you can take, I reckon. They can give, that's what they are great at, and to take what you are given isn't

the same as taking what you can get, is it? They give everything, more than ever you hoped or prayed for, then leave you with nothing at all."

"But why?" said Martin.

"I don't know, unless to make a man of you, and make you feel that you can damn well get along without them."

"Can you?"

"I seem to get along pretty well. I've cut a lot of wood in the last year. I've got fond of this bloody desert. I don't think *that* will ever go back on me." After a pause he asked: "How do you get on, can you do without a woman?"

There was a look both contemptuous and angry on Sherwin's face, but Martin smiled frankly at his companion. He liked this man, loved him for talking to him like this; he appreciated that angry look, feeling instinctively that it hid deeper feelings. "I don't know," he said. "I don't know anything about it. I don't think I shall stay here much longer."

"You want them no doubt. I know what it is. It drives you. That's what I was like, I went thinking all kinds of things, silly things, not a bit like what they are. Once you get that feeling, it's no good. May as well chuck it soon as late. There's no rest. . . ."

Martin looked at him wondering: "Yet you are back in the bush. There are no women here."

"No, I got it stiff, right in the neck. I don't think about it. I stay here because I like it and earn good money. That's something to be relied on."

"Do you never want to go back home?"

"Not till I've made good. What would be the use?"

"Do you want to buy land?"

"Perhaps, I shall take what comes."

A silence followed in which Martin looked at his hands and his strong arms, tanned red-brown in the sun. In a meditative and dreamy way he watched the working of the muscles and tendons as he turned his hand this way and that. He made his fist hard, and breathed on the taut skin across the knuckles. Looking up he met Sherwin's eyes. They both smiled. In that glance they understood one another as men. They were made of the same fibre and muscle, urged and restrained by the same desires and fears. Martin felt the same warm impulse of love that had come to him from the men in the shearing sheds. This other fellow, he was a man and young like himself. They were both men; the desert had made them the same; because of the desert they comprehended one another. Their senses were open to the same experience; they received from the same source the same imaginative intuition. Through their bodies flowed the same masculine perceptions. Their talk, these broken interjections, was of itself of small significance. How could it be of significance? It had but served to lead up to that glance of the eyes, that mute comprehension of the body, the interchanging meanings of the blood.

"I shan't stay here much longer myself," said Sherwin, "though I shall come back from time to time. It's better here than in towns." He stretched out his hand for his rifle and stood up. He looked round,

shading his eyes. On all sides the false-water glimmered in softly undulating waves. It lay three feet from the level of the ground, and the tops of the mulga bushes seemed to be floating upon its waves. "It's rummy," he said, "this mirage. No good trying to look for turkeys through this. It's like the sea. Strange, isn't it?"

"It's not so bad in the Creek," said Martin. "In a little while there will be some wind, and that will blow it away."

V

The next day Sherwin and Loo made their departure. Martin was sorry that they should go; he wanted to continue that unfinished conversation with Sherwin. He didn't know yet what all the things were that he wanted to say, but he knew that they were there under the surface, and that given time they would become articulate. This comradeship seemed a desirable and needful thing, yet he felt that he could make no effort to hold what had come so fortuitously, and that went as fortuitously as it had come. This was the way of the bush, perhaps the way of life: what the moment gave, the moment had given; there was nothing else to be desired or expected. He turned again to his work and his solitude. Before the evening of the same day, he considered how long it would take to complete the piece of work that he had then in hand. He would work till that was accomplished, then he would go south. He would go to seek those adventures that were to be found by men who lived amongst their own kind. He had remained a child beyond the years of childhood; now he would go away

from the land of fancies and imaginings. No doubt he would return in good time, but now he would go in quest of women and of love.

When he spoke to Mackay of his determination, the elder man chanced to be in one of his most melancholy moods. "You do well for yourself to go," he said. "If you take my advice, don't come back. If you ever think of marrying, keep away from the desert. It's no place for women."

Martin looked incredulous, for he knew very well that he was bound to come back, and he'd make a success of it too. O yes, he'd find some woman who would love the bush as much as he loved it. He knew there were such women. Wasn't his sister just such a one? Poor old Mackay, but of course he'd married the wrong woman; that was what was the matter. Besides, he was a bit cracked; he had come to the bush too old, people said he had lived there too long; he was loosing his powers.

"I dare say I shall come south myself before long," said Mackay. "I've had pretty nigh enough of it."

"And give up the station?"

"Ay."

Martin shook his head. "You'll never do that."

"So I used to think. Ideas change as one grows older. You'll find that women are too much for us. They wear us down in the end. They are so cocksure. They *know*, we men only hope and believe.

Martin did not feel the weight of these words; he smiled and again shook his head. "I shall find you here, boss. . . . Think of all the land you've taken up. It's fine, bonza land . . . fine for stock."

"Ay, so it is," said Mackay, heartened a little. "I

should like to live to see it properly developed." But in a moment he flagged again. "That will be for some other man. I tell you, I shall have to give up. It's only a matter of fixing the time when. . . ." He paused and shook his head. "I can't bring myself to that just yet."

"You never will. I shall see you when I come back." They shook hands. Mackay watched him go envying him the confidence of his youth. He began talking to himself, shaking his head and muttering.

VI

In the train southward, Martin felt the pain of departure. It seemed very strange that he should be leaving the land to which with such eagerness he had returned. The scenes from the windows were the same as they had been two and a half years ago. He remembered his joy of returning to the bush. Now he was glad after another fashion to be travelling south, leaving behind him the bush with all its loved and most familiar sights and sounds, and having as a forward prospect the town, the undiscovered lives of men and women, the contact with his own kind.

Chapter 4: *In the Capital*

I

IN the Government Gardens which are just opposite the Perth General Post Office there are many kinds of trees; there are eucalyptus and casuarinas, mimosa, paper, and pepper trees, and in amongst these native growths there are screw-palms, conifers, bananas and strelitzias. Under the trees are beds of tropical and semi-tropical plants; there are paths winding amongst them, and beside the paths are seats, some of which are shaded by thick growths of bamboo. On one of these seats Martin sat, watching the people as they passed. It was an engrossing occupation, for he had seen so few people in his life, and these men and women who walked through the gardens of the city varied much in their types and were so different from the red dust-stained men of the bush. For several days he had come to this same spot, and had sat watching. He had seen pass by men with large packets of papers and letters in their hands, which they would read as they walked; couples would go briskly by talking and not seeming to notice where they were going. Old men would come down the path like slow-moving beetles. Sometimes they would pause and look around them, they would prod in the earth with their sticks, take a few

steps further and peer at the flowers through their spectacles. Sometimes one of these elderly gentlemen would sit down on the seat beside him, and remain there patiently doing nothing. Sometimes they would read newspapers, and sometimes gaze with sightless eyes at their boots. They would cough and clear their throats. A certain young man, Martin noticed, came every morning to the gardens; he would take letters from his pocket and read them. Martin wondered about their contents. Boy and girl couples would pass by walking hand in hand, and sometimes with their arms about each other's waists. In the evenings men and women would sit close hugged together on the seats and on the grass, and he would watch them enviously, half-ashamed and half-angry.

Most of the day he would sit in idleness, if so intense a watching and speculating could be called idleness. He knew no one in the city. He was shy of talking; he felt that people looked at him almost as they might regard an animal, and, although he had bought new clothes and was dressed in the same fashion as the people of the town, he was self-conscious, believing that women were inclined to look at him and laugh. Sometimes girls did laugh as they passed; they threw him glances, but these he did not understand. He was diffident and did not dare answer their looks.

When he was tired of sitting in the gardens, he would wander about the city and up into King's Park where he could look out across Perth Water. He would watch the paddle-steamers going to South Perth. On one side he could look down upon the red roofs of the city, upon the big, grey warehouses and the

tall chimneys, the trams running to and fro, and the smoke floating up in wisps and spirals; and on the other side was a smooth lake-estuary. There were flocks of ducks and pelicans, and, in the evening, black swans, trailing in long V-shaped flights across the sky. He could see the pink undersides of their wings. It was a wonderful place this city by the water, beautiful, but not so beautiful, he thought, as the wild bush.

He was more lonely here than in the bush, for he spoke to no one except at the hotel when he ordered his meals. He longed to speak with the many people that he saw, but he was afraid, for in the daytime they all seemed to be in such a hurry, and in the evenings they were in couples or parties talking together.

If he had had work to do in the town, it would have been different, no doubt he could then have fallen naturally enough into his place. But he had not come there to work. He had worked enough in the bush. He had come for a special purpose, but now found himself a stranger to the men and women around him. There seemed no natural method of approach. Having no work, he had no place in all the activity of city life.

He might have gone to pub-bars and drunk with other men in from the bush with money to spend,—there were plenty of such men in Perth,—but Martin didn't want to spend his money. He was saving it for a special purpose. Money was power. He was going to have land of his own one day and live the free life that he desired.

For more than a week he endured a solitary existence, and every day he went to the public gardens and

watched the people as they passed. One day he spoke to the young man who came so regularly to read his letters. They exchanged but a few words of greeting, and question and answer, then parted. Martin felt with a sense of disappointment that this man's life was already full; there was no place in it for a stranger. This man was thinking about the letters that he came there to read, letters no doubt written to him by some woman. He had merely answered out of civility and was glad to be gone.

Martin thought of going to see his sister and brothers at Caple, but that was not what he had come for. He wanted new life and not to revive what was old. Why indeed should he go there? He had not yet made good. He remembered how Sherwin had refused the suggestion of visiting his parents. He, too, had wanted new life, not a taking up of the old.

And so he waited, and then one day his adventure came to him upon a full flood of expectations and delightful promise. He was in the gardens as usual, and heard two men talking of the White Star liner that on the previous night had touched at Albany, and had landed a large number of immigrants. Two special trains were being run from Albany to Perth. The first train would be due in half-an-hour's time. The two men were going down to the station to have a look at the new arrivals. Martin felt a sudden inquisitiveness; he, too, would like to see these people from across the seas.

As the train drew up, scores of faces filled the opened windows. With mixed feelings these new-comers must have looked out upon the long platform. The station buildings were like enough to many such in Eu-

rope, yet this was different from Europe. The sunlight that sifted in through the cracks, or which flowed through open spaces was different. The air was different, and the few nonchalant porters that slouched at long intervals were very different from their prototypes. The train stopped, bags, bundles, parcels of the strangest shapes were shot on to the platform, and the people began to flow out. Representatives of all the lower and middle classes of England were there. They mingled, and in that new country where class distinctions were not, they began to drink in, as with the air, the Australian democratic spirit.

Martin stood amongst a group of spectators and watched the immigrants struggling out of the train. The majority were men and women who looked competent and well-fitted for life. In them could be divined the power of the race, the dominating trait. Others were shabbily dressed and down at heel, but vital, stung by the excitement of arrival in a new land. One small group, however, seemed temporarily demoralized. Three men, all far gone in intoxication, stumbled out of a carriage. They were shabbily dressed and might have been mechanics or perhaps merely unskilled labourers; they staggered a few yards, then clung to the iron pillars that held up the roof. They clasped the pillars with their arms, and then, as their feet gave way, slid slowly down to a recumbent position. Their bundles were shot out after them; they lay indifferent to the tumult of moving feet. At a little distance, and near the entrance of the carriage from which these men had come, stood a little man in a brown coat. At first sight Martin got the impression of his being old and of his coat being well-

worn though neat; but on looking again he saw that he was not so very old but tired-looking, and could not indeed be much more than fifty. A girl, probably his daughter, Martin thought, was dragging the luggage out of the carriage and putting it down beside the little man, who counted the pieces and sometimes received from her the smaller parcels.

And now Martin's attention was suddenly captured by this young woman. She was a strong-looking girl with a somewhat broad face. She had a clear, white and pink complexion, blue eyes, and her hair, which was cut short at the shoulder, hung in light brown curls about her ears. When she had carried out all the smaller luggage, she looked round with a somewhat perplexed and searching expression to see if she could find a porter to help with the larger luggage which was in the van. The few porters were already engaged, and people were struggling with their own luggage, dragging it out from the great heap in which it had been piled. For a while the girl waited in indecision. Martin also waited. He would like to offer his services, but still hesitated; he did not dare speak to her for the very reason that he wanted so much to speak to her, to be near her and not to let her escape from his sight.

At last, believing that she could get no help, she went to where the pile of luggage was waiting to be claimed. She soon recognized her property, and began pulling at one of the heavier trunks, lifting one end and slewing it round, then lifting the other, gradually working it along the platform.

Martin made up his mind. He walked quickly up to her. "Let me do that," he said.

"Oh, thank you so much. Perhaps you would take one end." She smiled at him, her face at this closer inspection seemed to him to be bewilderingly attractive. He felt that he was blushing and was angry at his lack of control. He prepared to lift the trunk on to his back.

"It's much too heavy to lift like that," she said. "Let me take one end. I can manage quite well if you take the other."

He shook his head. "You stand clear, I can manage." It was a heavy trunk, heavier than he had thought, but he got it on to his back. It gave him satisfaction to know that she must perforce see the strong muscles of his arms. He put it down beside the little man in the worn brown coat, whose lined face smiled at him in a friendly way.

The girl was now opposite him as he stood flushed and breathing hard from his exertion. "You mustn't lift these heavy trunks and carry them on your back like that. They are too heavy. You'll hurt yourself."

"I like to take them like that," he said bluntly.

For some reason, perhaps because of a quick divination that he was attracted towards her, she smiled, colouring a little, and allowed him to have his way.

Martin sweated under the trunks and after a few journeys had all their belongings together in a pile. He now waited awkwardly, wondering what would happen next. He was determined not to walk away and so put an end to the episode. He glanced at the white flowered frock that the girl was wearing and at the place where the edge met the fair brown skin of her neck.

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"Well, father, what are we to do now?" She seemed amused at the uncertainty of them all.

The little man smiled and frowned, he shook his head and took a step towards Martin. "This gentleman who's been so kind, perhaps he can help us yet further. . . . Can you recommend a good place to stay where the prices are not expensive. We must stay at some hotel or boarding-house till we can find a house of our own. I have been told of some addresses." He began to open his pocket-case. "Perhaps you can advise me."

"King Edward's Hostel. . . . That's where I'm staying. It's a good place."

"Ah yes, that's down on my list. We had better go there. What do you think, Maggie?"

The girl nodded. This was all part of an amusing adventure. The whole journey had been such . . . serious enough, too, as an irrevocable step, yet always amusing. She was amused now at the powerful young stranger who stood looking so seriously at the pile of their luggage. He glanced up, meeting her eyes. "You've got a lot of stuff with you," he said.

"Yes, it's all our earthly possessions. We have come out here for good."

"From England?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Like my parents, they came from England when I was a youngster."

"So you were not born here?"

"No."

The conversation lapsed suddenly.

"I had better get hold of the bus," said Martin. "The driver can help me with the luggage." He went

off upon this errand, and when he returned the larger part of the crowd that thronged the platform had dispersed, only a few groups remained. He rejoined his new friends, who were waiting seated upon their luggage. This second meeting with the girl confirmed his earlier impressions. Her features expressed a certain frankness, and an open speculation which was both alert and tranquil. She smiled as he came towards them, and though there was little foundation for his assurance, he read into that smile a greeting of recognition and acceptance of friendship.

"It is good of you to help us. There seem to be so few porters and such a lot of luggage. We could never have managed alone."

Martin was embarrassed, and not knowing how to receive her thanks was silent. He looked vaguely around, and in a little his eyes rested on the men who had stumbled intoxicated from the train, and who now lay where they had fallen. He nodded in their direction. "They've taken pretty well all they can hold," was his comment.

"Yes, they are terribly drunk," said the girl. "Do you know they spent all the money they'd got, so we were told, all their money on drink. Most of it went on the ship on the way out, but they spent the last few shillings at some place the train stopped at, and now they have got nothing at all. It seems rather dreadful for them to arrive like that. Don't you think so?"

"They'll find plenty of their own sort," said Martin philosophically. "And when the drink's out of them, they'll pick up jobs easy enough."

"Even if they drink?"

"Yes, for that reason. Lots of men would rather

employ drunkards than any other. They work them harder on the lowest wage. Chaps like that have given up hoping; they don't hope for anything; they work for wages, and drink what they get. They don't save or think about themselves; they just drink and then go back to work again. They'll soon find work; no doubt about that." He saw a slightly scared, somewhat hurt look come into the girl's eyes, and felt sorry that what he had said should have produced it. "They are happy enough too, they have nothing to worry about."

"Do you call that happiness?" Disdain and pity mingled in her face as she looked at the sleeping figures.

The older man, who had been watching these two young people with some interest and amusement, now broke in upon their conversation and saved Martin the difficulty of answering. "To see life clearly and consequently rather brutally is not altogether, my dear, a bad thing. Not every twig bears flowers. There is no absolute standard of happiness." Then turning to Martin, who was a bit puzzled by the old gentleman's manner and address: "My daughter, as befits her age, is somewhat of an idealist, and would like people to behave according to ideas of her own. Perhaps, and very likely, they would be the better if they did."

"No, father, that's putting it wrong. If they like to be drunk—well, they can. But it does seem rather a pity when they've come out to a new country, to start life anew, to arrive with all their money spent and like that. Don't you think so?"

Martin, thus directly appealed to, laughed. "I'd rather keep away from the drink myself," he said,

"and work for myself and have land of my own." He felt quite unwarrantably proud as he spoke, but he was only telling the truth, that was what he was like, that was what he meant to attain. He wanted this girl to understand him, not to imagine that he was a man who would be satisfied with mere wages. He had a thrill of gladness that he had spoken. A spark had passed between them, she had listened and had approved.

II

After putting the luggage on to the bus, Martin returned to the hotel alone. He was elated, and there was strange pain in his elation. He went to his room and there walked up and down. After a while he sat beside his bed and remained almost motionless. A mood of stillness and expectation, such as he had felt sometimes in the bush, came upon him. For a long while he remained thus, and sometimes a faint smile would move upon his lips. From out of the vacancy of this waking dream, he became aware of the sound of carts passing in the street under the window. He looked up at the yellow sunlight falling upon the roofs opposite and upon the white faces of the houses. He watched the particles of dust floating in the shaft of sunlight that entered his room. He stood up, and the smile that had played so shyly upon his lips became definite, the lines about his eyes creased as if he were looking at some distant object. . . . He rubbed his eyes with his clenched fists, and the image of that imagined girl that in the bush had so often travelled upon the edge of his existence was now utterly vanished. Her place was

filled by a concrete being, far different from any of his imaginings, stranger, more desirable. . . . Unexpectedly he felt sleepy and tired; he turned to his bed, stretched himself upon it and slept.

III

That evening at supper, Mr. Linton and his daughter looked for the young man who had given them his service. They were sorry to see that he was placed so far from them in the saloon and after the meal they asked him to join them upon the verandah. It was already twilight, though there were still flecks of red in the sky. The air was pleasantly cool. Mr. Linton and his daughter settled themselves in deck chairs, and Martin stood leaning upon the rail, looking down into the street. For the first time in his life he felt the strange pleasure that a city can give. He was today no longer so complete a stranger as formerly; the people who passed to and fro, intent upon their own concerns, did not seem so far separated from himself. He, too, had a place; the old man and the girl with whom he was talking had asked for his company.

Conversation soon touched on Mr. Linton's prospects and the cause of his migration. He had been strongly advised to come to Western Australia on account of his health; there was some trouble with his lungs. For a long time he had been loath to make the move, but Maggie had persuaded him to come. He had sold his business in Birmingham, and would now have to make a new start. He hoped as jeweller and watch-maker to set up a small shop in Perth.

"It is something of an adventure. We are pledged to it altogether. It is sink or swim. My daughter

helps me with the work. She has been through a thorough apprenticeship; she is clever with her hands, and has good ideas about design."

"I'm still only a beginner," said Maggie. "Father teaches me. He's a real artist. You should see some of the work that he has done. It's beautiful, quite different from the ordinary stuff one sees in shops. He understands about the qualities of stones and metals, how they should be set and worked together. He *feels* how they should be, and so makes lovely things. We neither of us care so very much about the repairs, which are the largest part of our business. Repairing watches and clocks, that's the drudgery; we get most of our money from that; but what we really like is designing and making jewels. Enamelling is great fun when it's successful, but so often it spoils in the burning. If only people would see how nice our things are and buy them, but they don't, they buy the ordinary, vulgar stuff. . . . You know the sort of thing: rubies and diamonds and turquoise all crowded together in an ugly lump of gold."

Martin didn't know in the least, though he had rather admired, for their flashing brightness, the windows of the jewellers that he had passed. He didn't doubt that Maggie and her father knew much better than he did what was really good. "I should like to see what you make," he said.

"It's in our boxes, but I'll show you when we've unpacked." She hesitated a second, then took from her neck a thin gold chain from which was hanging a little pendant. She held it out to him. "I made that."

Martin took it in his hand. It was a small thing, barely an inch across. In the centre was a conven-

tional heart of pink enamel, on either side were incurved wings and pink and blue feathers. Two arrows transfixed the heart diagonally, and above was a broad, conventional crown. In the crown were set five tiny diamonds, and in the middle of the crown was a small ruby. Over the front of the heart was a larger ruby and on the end of the wings were three tiny diamonds as on the crown. To Martin it appeared a masterpiece of craft, it seemed extraordinary that any one should fashion a thing so complicated and fine. He looked at it in silence for some time, turning it over and looking at the bright enamelled colours of the underside. "My word, that's fine." Then after a pause: "I think you'll like some of the flowers that grow in the bush." He turned it again in his hand. "That's lovely." He looked up to meet her blue eyes, excited at his praise, excited, too, at having let a thing so intimate and precious to herself out of her keeping: this little winged heart that she had made, pierced as it was with arrows and crowned with rubies and diamonds.

"Give it me back. . . . Thank you."

"One doesn't see a great deal of modern work of that sort," said her father. "The enamelling is more difficult to do than one would imagine. It takes a lot of failures to get one success. But when one is successful, it's worth the trouble, eh? . . . That piece is in a good tradition, after the Italian, not ornate nor decadent, yet not timid: no timid nor strained simplicity."

He was so obviously proud of his daughter and of her work that Martin could feel communicated to him-

self the warmth of her father's pleasure. "I'd like to see other things that you've made," he said.

"When our boxes are unpacked, there will be plenty to show," said Mr. Linton. "But first of all we must find a house to live in. We must start looking for that at once, as we can't afford to stay here longer than necessary."

"If I can help you, I should like to. I've got nothing to do while I am here. I would like to help if I can."

Mr. Linton hesitated before answering. "It's very kind of you, but haven't you got work of your own to do?"

"No, not now. I don't live here. I'm only here for a bit."

"Are you on a holiday?" asked the girl.

"Well, yes, I suppose I am."

She laughed at the uncertainty of his admission. "Isn't it a holiday when you don't work and have nothing definite to do?"

"I suppose it is. You see, I've never lived in a big town before. I've always been in the bush."

"What do you do there?"

It was now Martin who smiled. "Oh, lots of different things. I've been working on a big station, making fences a good part of the time, and sometimes riding round mending fences that have got broken and trampled down." He was amused and flattered by the interest that her eyes expressed. "Sometimes I'm with the big mobs of steers or cows, and sometimes go to brand the calves, or go to look for sheep, and when it's shearing time, I'm put on to shearing, all sorts

of jobs, whatever I'm put to. Sometimes it's breaking in three-year-old colts. We get some fine horses up there."

"Then you are a real bushman such as one reads about or sees at the pictures. Aren't they terrible people with revolvers and sheriffs and things?"

Martin smiled and shook his head.

"It must be a wonderful life," she said.

"It is that. I wouldn't change it for any other."

"Is it very wild up there? Are there many people?"

"Not many people, just open country right away to the spinifex desert and the rolling sandhills of the interior, where there are no people living at all, not even natives."

"Have you been there, right up to the desert?" she asked. "It must be wonderful, the untouched country where men don't go."

"It is that, I've been into it. I should like to go further one day. Oh, it's fine. You can have no idea what it's like in the twilight, in the early morning before sunrise . . . so silent and empty, the air so clear. Can you imagine it?" His voice was touched with a certain seriousness, a certain eager hope.

She looked past him considering that question. In the open candour of her eyes he perceived an untried bravery, an unafraid speculation. "Yes, I can imagine it. I've sometimes thought about deserts and wild places."

The words that she spoke were simple and of no obvious significance, yet they made his heart beat fast with exaltation. For some moments he was oblivious to his position upon the verandah and to all the noises

of the street; his life had become changed, his heart within him was different from the boy's heart that had lived so long in solitude. He had discovered much. He was shaken with the wave of his discovery. . . .

He was aware of meeting her eyes again, and of perceiving therein intimations of many things as yet unknown. He looked away and was conscious once more of all the noises and bustle of the town, of Mr. Linton sitting in his chair smoking his pipe, and of the other guests of the hotel who had come out on to the verandah.

IV

Mr. Linton could never have been described as a practical man of affairs. He was aware rather of those emotions within the mind which constitute for the artist his vision, and because of his preoccupation with these emotions he had never taken a very practical view of the trade that he followed. His ability had sufficed to keep him and his household from poverty, but he had never prospered. His interest was not in the amassing of worldly wealth, though he would have been glad to possess money to enable him to buy the stones and metals whose qualities he so well understood and loved.

His wife had died while his only child was still an infant, and Maggie, as she grew up, had been bound to her father by the love of a hungry heart. Yet the relation between father and daughter had survived; it had been saved by his devotion to his work. In work there was an impersonal and free outlet, and because of his work their friendship had been able to grow. His work with metals and stones and his occu-

pation with design had been for them the *idea* under whose shadow they had lived. It had been their safeguard. It may not have seemed very much, but it had sufficed; and because she saw his devotion to an art which he did not question, and which brought little material reward, her love was able to cope with the hard, critical faculty of youth which lays bare so mercilessly the failures of age. Because of that devotion, which was childish in its simpleness of purpose, she could see him as a child, who by reason of that very devotedness remained always a child.

The maternal instinct was developed, and when Maggie realized that her father's health was affected by the cold and damp of England, she had planned the migration to West Australia, where the air is clean and dry, and where, for nine months of the year, no clouds are seen. It was a bold venture and had not been accomplished without misgivings. But now, at last, they were arrived in this new land, this continent of sunshine, where every plant and tree was of a different character from any that they had ever seen before.

It was a tonic experience; very invigorating was that fine air, the brilliant light and colour. Mr. Linton already felt the good effects of the change, but nothing is gained without sacrifice, and as he looked into the shop-fronts of the jewellers in Hay Street and Wellington Street he lamented over the crude and heavy designs which so positively declared the national lack of culture. He had little hope that his own work would be appreciated, it seemed only too likely that his chief source of income would be, as heretofore, from the repairing of clocks and watches.

His first days in the colony were spent in looking at small houses and shops advertised as being empty, and to be rented. None of these were in central positions, and after a time he came to realize that he must be contented to live in one of the suburbs. There was a small bungalow in South Perth which attracted both himself and his daughter on account of its compactness, its garden and its general air of homeliness. These were its recommendations, but its situation was not promising as regards trade. It was not at all what he had set out to find. It was not a commercial proposition, but it was home-like and inexpensive and both he and Maggie approved of its unpretentious and friendly appearance. The passion-fruit, the bougainvillaea and the giant geraniums which grew within the fence inclosure had seemed indeed too wonderful a contrast to the privet and euonymus of their front garden in Birmingham. They longed to possess as their own that tangle of vegetation.

Because they were not in a position to remain at the hotel spending their money in idleness, and because they were eager to set up house of their own, they came abruptly to their decision: they agreed to rent on a lease of three years the little cottage in South Perth. After the signing of the agreement, they walked down Hay Street to Government Gardens, feeling very elated by the courage of this deliberate act.

"There is a satisfaction in feeling that one is committed," said Mr. Linton, "and, after all this is no more adventurously speculative than has been the whole expedition. I am glad we have settled on something, and can now look forward to getting to work."

Maggie nodded. "Yes, I'm glad and it's a lovely

place. Have you thought how nice it will be waking up in the mornings and looking out on to all those strange trees and hearing the strange birds? They make such funny cries. I hope we see more of those beautiful white cockatoos, just like the ones we see in cages in Europe, but they are quite wild, such pinkey, creamy-looking beauties. They look of course much nicer amongst their own trees. . . . The wild flowers that grow in that sandy sort of earth are so beautiful. I am going to use them for designs. Oh, it will be lovely to get to our things again."

Linton nodded. "Yes, I noticed the flowers, some combinations of colours and curious shapes. Perhaps the people here will like to see their native flowers made up into designs."

"I'm sure they will," said Maggie hopefully.

"It will take time for any one to know that we are here, right out in that wild place."

"We'll make friends, already we've got one friend."

"Your bushman, you mean?"

"Yes, the bushman."

"Who's as new to the place as we are and doesn't know a soul," said Mr. Linton, smiling.

"No, he doesn't know any one," Maggie admitted. "Isn't it a strange life that he's had? Such a wonderful kind of life it must be. He's told me a lot about himself."

"He's found his tongue, has he?"

Maggie gave a glance at her father. She caught his eye, looked frankly at him, coloured a little and smiled. "He's quite extraordinary naïve and simple. In some ways it's like talking to a new-born baby that can think and talk and appreciate things. He's lived

such a solitary life, quite unlike any one I've ever met."

"Has he got any relatives? What has happened to his parents?"

"He's got two brothers and a sister. They are somewhere down in the south. He doesn't seem very anxious to go and see them. 'What would be the use till I have money of my own?' he says. He's awfully keen on power and what he calls 'making good.' "

Linton smiled at recollections of his own youth. "That's the right point of view," he said.

"His mother died at some place where they lived right out in the wild when he was quite a boy. He seems to have forgotten her rather, and his father. . . . You know he doesn't know where his father is. He hasn't seen him for more than three years. People seem to go wandering about in the bush country, and every now and then they turn up at a town and then they go wandering off again. His father's like that, only he hasn't turned up for three years. He may be lost altogether, perhaps dead. Nobody seems to know anything about him."

"Almost a nomad existence."

"Yes, but Martin wouldn't know what you meant if you use words like that. He's had the most elementary form of education. He can read and write, but that's about all. But he's nice. He seems to understand things as if he were quite well educated, and sees and notices everything."

"So you call him Martin?"

"Yes. I couldn't call him Mr. O'Brien, not a baby like that who's so new to the world: about as new as if he'd hatched out of an egg, quite fully grown."

There was a short silence, and Linton turned upon his daughter a kindly though scrutinizing gaze. "He is rather an attractive young man, isn't he?"

Maggie considered before she answered. "Yes, I find him attractive. He's so different from the other young men that I have known."

Linton put out his hand to his daughter. She touched it delicately with her finger-tips.

"It's a good thing I know what a very wise young woman you are," he said.

Chapter 5: *Maggie*

I

ON either side of the gravel walk were flowering eucalyptus trees. About their red, rosette-like blossoms, insects fluttered and buzzed, and sometimes bright-winged beetles settled and thrust their heads deep within the mossy centres of the flowers. Others of their kind circled in wide curves, soaring into the sunlight and appearing as dark specks against the sky. A young man and a young woman, who having started early from the town were now climbing the path that led to the highest outlook in King's Park, paused opposite a tree that showed more flowers than its fellows. Maggie, who had never before seen a eucalyptus in full bloom, gazed upward at the crimson blossoms and the blue-green stalks and the blue-green, elongated leaves that were so motionless against the deep blue sky.

"They are not quite like ordinary flowers, are they? . . . so stiff and conventional-looking, but their colour is lovely, so deep and bright against the sky. I like them. I had no idea Australia would be so beautiful. I wonder why it is more people, many more people, don't come here. Why do so many stay in England? They wouldn't if they knew. In England one never gets a sky like that or such dry, fresh

air, no, nor even beetles like that bright-winged fellow." Her eyes following it as it soared, turned towards the harbour and the great panorama of land and sea. "Oh, and look . . . how beautiful . . . and those little boats, how white their sails are." Through the trees she had caught a glimpse of the river-estuary, a pale mirror of calm water, milky blue in the morning light. Upon the distant side, South Perth, from whence they had come, was rose-pink and opalescent. In a line five small white sails followed one another, making for the open sea. As she turned to her companion, her eyes were bright and glistening; they were moist with an emotion gendered by the surprising and uplifting beauty of the world. "It's wonderful, all wonderful. . . . So splendid to be alive."

Martin was pleased but a little uncertain how to meet this naïvete, this show of emotion. "Ay, it's a fine enough morning. I'm glad you like the gum-flowers and the beetles. I don't suppose every one would take notice of such things."

"And the sea. I love the sea."

"It's well enough," he admitted. "This is all right, but I'd like to show you the bush, the real bush. Not what they call bush at South Perth, but up North. I'm sure you'd like that."

She had turned from him and was gazing over the water wrapped in the contemplation of its cool serenity. "Yes, I expect I should like that too. Oh, Martin, what a wonderful land it is!"

It gave him a thrill of pleasure to hear her call him by name. He was now standing behind her and looking at the different shades of brown and gold in her hair; he could see, too, the curve of her cheek and

chin, shaded by the brim of her hat. He could feel the happiness and elation of her life as something very young and inexperienced, fresh and undaunted. She turned towards him suddenly. "Tell me about your wild bush, where you've lived and worked. It can't be better than this. Can it be better than this?"

Martin could find no words.

"Don't look so perplexed. Tell me about it. Are there wonderful flowers?"

"In the spring there are flowers after the rain."

"Only in the spring?"

"Only for a short while. I told you about them, dry-petaled flowers, crisp and stiff."

"Are there any there now at this time?"

"Not yet, but in a few weeks, after the rains."

"What happens to them?"

"They get burnt up."

"You mean that they wither and die. The plants must be there just the same."

"No, they get burnt up too."

She was a little perplexed, and Martin was amused at her uncertainty. "Are there fires? I've heard of bush fires."

"Not often. It's the sun. It burns them up to a sort of powder. There's nothing left of them."

"It must be terribly hot."

"My word, yes, at mid-day, but it cools off at night."

"Is the ground all bare?" asked the girl, getting a sudden picture of the desert. "Isn't it rather dreadful?"

Martin shook his head. "Why, no."

"It's all the green and the blue that are so beautiful," she said, "and the water. Is there no grass?"

"Not what you'd call grass here. There's spinifex, a sort of dry, hard grass grows in some places, in tussocks, but it's no good for anything but to make a bed of. There are bushes, lots of little bushes, what the stock eat, and there's salt-bush in some parts; little low scrub. . . . Sheep like that, it's got a fleshy, juicy sort of leaf."

"It's difficult to imagine." She smiled and shook her head. "It must be a kind of desert."

Martin nodded. "That's what they call it."

"You like it better than this, better than the sea? I've heard of deserts having a great charm, being very wonderful. I've never seen one."

"It's not altogether what you see, it's what you feel." He met her thoughtful and speculative gaze. "I believe you'd like it all right, though there are some people who don't seem to be able to stand it. I'm pretty sure you'd like it; though I can't explain about it much. It isn't what you see, but what you feel: the little noises and silences, the feeling of bigness. . . ."

"A sort of freedom," she said. "I get that here. I get that at sea, or in any wild place. It's like a kind of food, don't you think? Something is always being given, yet something more is always promised that one never gets."

"Yes, that's it. You put it ever so well, better than I could ever think to. That's what it's like in the bush. You put things much better than I can," he repeated. "Something that's promised that one never gets. One gets it, too, in a way. My word, one couldn't live without it."

They walked further up the hill, each following their

separate thoughts, which if they did not run parallel, ran fairly close. At the crest there was a look-out with seats. There were sheltering trees, and creepers which climbed the uprights and trailed over the roof.

"One soon gets hot in the bright sun, even in the morning. It's lovely and cool in here. How nice of them to build a little place like this and put seats."

Martin, because he felt that there was a certain feebleness and unmanliness in sitting down before he had taken any real exercise, and because he would rather be opposite Maggie than sitting beside her, remained standing, leaning against the rail. For a little while they looked out over the park, over the sloping hillside so rich in variegated plants, over the great sun-bathed estuary and the distant sand-dunes.

She began after a short pause: "I find this all so different from England. It's exciting."

"I've forgotten what it's like over there," he said. "I was only a kid when I came out."

"There is a strange sense of freedom here; I wonder if you can understand. It is almost as if I had never known how to breathe before. It is nice to think of such a big country and so few people in it. That sounds selfish. Is it?"

Martin shook his head. He didn't know if it was selfish or not. If it were selfishness, it became her well. She was altogether admirable to him; it was a delight to look at her and to hear her speak. Her clothes, the blue dress that she wore, her white hat, everything about her gave him pleasure. "Tell me about England," he said, "where you lived and all that. What was it like there?"

She paused a moment, considering. "No, you must tell me first. I want to hear more about Australia. All you can tell me."

He smiled and shook his head. "Nothing much has happened to me. I've just lived in the bush and looked after stock and done odd jobs. I told you all about that."

"But about the people, the men and women that are there. Tell me from the beginning where you lived and the sort of life it is."

It was incongruous this talk about himself, absurd that he should give the story of his life, yet he was flattered by her interest. Besides, since she asked, it was right that she should know. If she were to be his wife, and that thought had already fluttered like a shy bird into his mind, she must know about the bush and about Quinn's Springs and Nallagoo, the sort of life, the charm and wonder of it. Shortly, brusquely, yet not without interest, he told her of the main facts of his existence; of himself and his sister as boy and girl in the bush, of Alec and Alec's death, of Nance, of his mother and her sudden death, of his father and of the hut at Seven Trees. His narrative rambled regardless of chronology. He mentioned details that he himself had almost forgotten, and that made Maggie smile, but he didn't mention Jane or Evans nor the nights alone with Nance and the wild, strange birth of that early love. He told of his schooling and the time at Caple, the failure it had been, his estrangement from his sister, his friendship for Mrs. Peppercorn and how she had sent him back to the bush to get power and money and make good. He told her how

he worked for Mackay, how Clara was discontented and hated the life, how Mackay was mad about growing wheat, and how he himself had worked and saved money, a lot of money, he'd banked it, more than three hundred pounds. He had warmed to his theme and was now enthusiastic. One day he would buy a farm, own his own land, his own cattle and sheep. And then at the end of his story, he paused.

"Why did you come to Perth?" she asked. He seemed troubled by that question.

"I don't know," he said simply. "Something drew me, something made me come." He looked steadily at her upturned face that showed so much interest and sympathy. He smiled gravely. "I think I must have come to meet you."

She blushed and looked down.

In a moment he was sorry that he had been so simple and so frank. "I met a fellow up in the bush who was sandle-wood cutting," he went on quickly. "We talked a lot one day. It was that made me want to come and see what people were like. I had only seen so few, just in ones and twos. I wanted to see a lot of them at once."

"I think you've *lived*," she said with a kind of envy, "but a strange life, so many people seem to come right into it and occupy so much of it, and then go out again suddenly, quite utterly out, and disappear. It's like a line with a lot of little crosses on it, no definite pattern. You've had friends, and you've let them go."

"They just went on," he said. "It's like that in the bush."

"Don't you feel lonely?"

He considered. "Ay, yes, I do. That's it, one's all alone. Just oneself."

"And other people like strange boats at sea, passing by."

"Maybe, something like that; no, not altogether. One gets fond of them you know, awfully glad to see them again. Even Father, I'm quite fond of him. I don't want to see too much of him," he added with a smile. "He's had too much bad luck."

"It's so different, so very different from my life," she said. "I've sat still in one place and had one great friend, one person that I've loved. . . . My father. . . . We know each other so well. He has taught me almost everything that I know. We've worked together, and I've been able to help him. Without each other we'd seem lost. . . . I've lived in Birmingham as long as I can remember, in the same house, in the same street; and now it seems as if we had come out from a little pocket, rather a dear little pocket that we loved, out into the world, into the real, bright sunlight. It's rather dazzling and exciting, you know." Her eyes seemed to Martin to be sparkling at that moment with the excitement. "It's wonderful, almost unbelievable. . . . Why, two months ago, when we were at Liverpool getting on to the boat, I could hardly have believed that there were people like you living in the world at all."

Martin, struck by this last sentence, looked at her wonderingly. "I didn't know there were people like you," he said, shaking his head. "Not another!"

"Not another of you either!"

They both laughed.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"I'm twenty-two."

"A year younger than me."

Maggie laughed. "Ever so much older than you really."

He looked at her seriously. "How do you mean?"

"Well, I suppose it's odd, because by experience, if that counts, you must have had more than me. But by some inner, feminine kind of experience, women are always older than men." And she laughed. "I've known my father ever since I could know anything, and that's an experience. That's partly why I'm so much older."

"He looks old," said Martin, stating a fact without any consciousness of disparagement.

Maggie smiled. She had a clear mental picture of her father's lined face. "You like him, don't you?" she asked.

Their eyes met, and Martin nodded.

"You mightn't see it at first," she said, "but he's a wonderful man. Not only a good artist and craftsman, but he knows people. He understands them because he's so wise and good. He doesn't think or worry about all the little mean things that don't matter. He always thinks of what's best, and he's so conscientious. Oh, he's thrown away chances other men would have taken because he wouldn't do anything but what he knew was the best work."

Martin found it difficult to comment. He remembered Alec and the loading of the wool-packs. Those lessons learned in youth had stuck by him. "Ay," he said gravely.

Because of that simple monosyllable, Maggie knew

that he had understood. He, too, was a man who was out for the best in life.

II

That day they picnicked in the park, and in the late afternoon embarked in one of the ferry steamers for South Perth. They found places near the prow and stood near the forward rail, watching the water fly up in a continuous, many-coloured bow as the centre plate of steel, the vertical line of the stem, cut through. They watched the thousands of drops falling in spray, and floating, round and pearl-like, on the waves. There was fascination in the movement of the clear, blue water. For most of the short journey they had been silent, and Martin had only spoken to point out the iridescent medusæ that floated here and there just beneath the surface. Maggie had nodded her recognition without speaking.

Because of the moving water and the moving ship, they had fallen into a kind of dream, a dream in which thoughts were indolent, their form not strictly censored by waking consciousness, yet they were pleasantly aware of each other, aware of an onward, swift movement, a confidence in life.

"Have you any religion?" asked Maggie abruptly. It was a preposterous question, and she knew it as such as soon as she had uttered it. She didn't want a real answer, yet it was fun at that moment to ask such a question. She was inquisitive to know what he would say. It was to probe a side of him that was unknown to her, or only dimly divined.

"Do you mean God and that?" He turned towards her.

She did not look up but gazed at the flying spray. "Yes."

"Not much in my line. I don't know anything about it. At the Creek I went to church once or twice. I didn't like it much." He turned her own question upon her: "Have *you* any religion?"

They were now out of that dream gendered by the moving water and the long hours of sunlight. They were keenly awake now.

Still, she did not look up. "I ought to have *lots*," she said, mouthing the word a little. "Father's religious; he's what's called an atheist or an agnostic. That means some one who doesn't believe in God, but he thinks an awful lot of Jesus, and believes in the Kingdom of Heaven. He says that the Kingdom of Heaven must be taken by storm, and that the only people who can never, never get there are the fools. I believe he thinks that most religious people are fools, people who pass for religious and go to church a lot; not vicious fools, but fools out of laziness; not the sort of people who would take the Kingdom of Heaven by storm."

"What's he mean by that?"

"A kind of thirst for knowledge, I think, a live knowledge. A belief. . . ."

Martin broke in. "Would he think me a fool?"

At last she looked up at him and laughed. "No, I'm sure he wouldn't, not a bit."

She straightened her back, and letting go of the rail, she laughed out of lightness of heart and because of the excitement of this conversation that had led her companion so far out of his depth. They were indeed both so much involved by their thoughts that

they had not noticed that the boat was nearing the jetty. It now came, with a jerk, into contact with the wooden structure.

Maggie was thrown forward suddenly. Martin put out his arms to save her, and, for a moment, he felt the soft delight of her body. He breathed the fragrance of her hair and felt her cling to him for support. He held her close against his breast in a rapture of happy excitement. For a moment she lay still without resistance. Then, because of the crowd of people on deck who were all laughing at the impact that had sent them staggering, she freed herself.

"Oh, what a bump," she said and laughed again, conscious of her bright colour and the bathos of her remark.

Martin was too charged with emotion to answer. He merely gazed at her with eyes inspired by a new knowledge. Yet it was because of the old knowledge of the desert, the old power of endurance that he now stood there so mute with confidence. The bright blood of his youth showed burningly through the brown of his sun-tanned skin.

III

As the petals within a bud, already full formed, will remain yet many days curled beneath the calyx, waiting the moment of release before they open to the warmth of the sun, so Martin's love remained mute and waiting within his heart. Like a bud in sunlight he felt the pleasure of that beneficent warmth; his heart was uplifted to the rays of her charity; it was sufficient to be near her, to see her move, to hear her speak. He made no pretence to disguise the motives

of his visits, he came to see her: that was enough. Why should he hide a motive so obvious and sufficient? This was the way of nature, unhurried and unmarred. The girl, amid the interest of the new home and the old work taken up anew, would wait his comings, and, with the deep, inner knowledge of the body, knew well for what she waited. In his presence, the elation of her senses acknowledged the tribute paid by his manhood, by the power which she divined in the slow movements of his limbs.

Every day he came early to the cottage and stayed late. Part of the time he dug in the garden under Maggie's direction; he took seeds from little packets and planted them in neat rows as he was told. Gardening was a new art. He had believed that only Chinamen made gardens, but if Maggie knew so much about it, he could learn from her instruction. And when the gardening was done, he would sit idly in the sun, half-conscious that he was waiting for something to happen within himself, waiting for some seed planted in his heart to unfold and grow, waiting for some marvellous flower. At other times he was chiefly conscious of the new world of thought and comprehension: this elaborating of metals and stones, this fine and delicate work so different from the rough usage of limbs. Very pretty it was; oh yes, wonderful. He could see the beauty in it since Maggie had pointed it out. . . . Different from the stuff in the shop-windows, more like the flowers, but living, like the flowers, a half-secret, half-revealed life of its own. He liked to take out the little drawers of jewels, some cut and some uncut, and let the stones slip through his fingers. Once he picked up a little bar of gold.

He looked idly at its yellow, shining surface, and had for a second an intimation of its charm and glamour; he put it down amongst the tools that lay scattered on the table, and did not then recognize its close association with the desert, or suspect its destined and profound influence upon his own life.

There was Mr. Linton who was not only Maggie's father but her friend. He didn't talk much, but would sit most of the time in his room and work. In the evenings and at meal-times, he would come into the verandah and sniff the air and look at the gardening that had been done. Once he praised Martin for the way he had mended and strengthened the fence of the enclosure. "That's my sort of job. I understand that," Martin had said, and Mr. Linton had looked at him with so curious and intent a look that Martin felt that, though this man had failed to achieve worldly success, there was within him a power demanding respect in its own right. He felt that he knew very little of what the elder was thinking, but was almost uncomfortably aware of his own simplicity. Yet Mr. Linton took no advantage of his superior position, and Martin, though he concerned himself little on that score, believed that he was approved.

The days passed happily enough, charged with those small events, which make up, in their sum, the understandings of human relationship.

Then one morning Martin did not appear, all that day he was absent, the next day, and the next. Throughout the first day Maggie waited expectant, feeling sure that he would come; not till night did she give up hope of his appearance. She did not admit

even to herself the feeling of slight injury that she sustained; as the day progressed, anxiety settled upon her heart. In the evening she accompanied her father upon his daily walk. He remarked casually upon Martin's non-appearance.

"It's curious his not coming, he said he would be here. Do you think any accident could have happened?"

"There is no reason to suppose so. Wait till tomorrow and see if he does not turn up as usual," her father had answered rather dryly.

"There are lots of jobs that I have got for him to finish in the garden," she said, feeling that she had been over serious.

"Young men are not always to be relied on in their movements."

"No, I suppose not."

After that they let the subject drop, and talked of other things.

The next day Maggie waited in suspense. In the evening, when the working day was done, she announced her intention of going in to Perth to enquire at the hotel if Martin was there, or if anything had happened to him.

Mr. Linton frowned slightly. "You are anxious about him?"

She nodded.

"Wait till tomorrow; you know he is under no obligation to come and see us."

"Something serious may have happened."

"Are you so sure that he would come?"

"I think he would come. I want to know. He

may be ill, and he is quite alone in Perth. We are the only friends he has. He is so simple and direct. What should keep him away?"

Her father considered for a few moments. "I will come with you," he said, "it will be better for me to ask."

At the hotel, they learned that Martin had been last seen on the morning of the previous day. He had left the hotel in the rain,—it had been raining for several days for the spring rains had come,—and since then they had seen or heard nothing of him. His bill had been paid at the end of the previous week; there were two days' account owing; his things were in his room; he had given no warning of his departure. The hotel-keeper did not take the disappearance seriously: "He'll turn up in a day or two, sure enough. These young chaps, they go gadding about, one place or another. Perhaps some one offered him a job, and he took the train straight away up country, no time to come back and get his things. I've known that to happen more than once. If you're his friends, no need to fret, he'll turn up."

So they had gone back, no wiser than they had come. Maggie was reticent on the return journey, but when they were back home again, she admitted her concern and her anxiety. "If some accident has happened, we ought to look for him."

Linton frowned and his face appeared more lined than usual, then smiling he held out his hand to his daughter. He took her hand in his. "My dear child, . . ." then he paused. "You have let yourself care perhaps too much for this young fellow."

"He has been a good friend."

"I think you have let him become more than that."

"Yes, I care more than that." Then not to let more be supposed than she would herself admit, "I care that he should be well and strong."

"He may very well be both well and strong." Linton smiled a little wanly. "Remember how little we know of him, of the very manner of his life."

"He's not insincere," said Maggie, catching an imputation in the words.

"No, I don't think he is, though he may be inconsiderate." There was a silence, then he continued: "You will let me speak to you?" Her fingers tightened on his hand. "This man, though he may have obvious virtues that we can both see well enough, may not be the best man to make you a good husband." Maggie's face was averted, she did not speak. "He comes from a world entirely different from that which you have known; he has no culture, no education."

"That's what I like."

"Is it truly that? Isn't it something different?"

"I don't know."

"To be of a different and superior culture from her husband is a difficult thing for a young woman."

"Oh, culture, culture doesn't matter. Who cares about culture!"

"It matters more than you would suppose. Not only his culture, his habits, his physical habits even are different. The hardy life of the bush has made him of almost a different body from ourselves. Have you noticed that he can sit in the blazing sun of mid-day while you feel hot and faint in the shade?"

"That surely is a trifle."

"It is the trifles that are the big things of life."

"It is my weakness. In time it can be remedied."

"That, too, may be difficult. Remember that he will need a woman hardy as himself to live the rough life of a pioneer." Maggie was silent. Her father continued: "I would not have you overlook these differences; they are important."

"He is so honest, so splendidly honest, so sure of himself. He will succeed."

"Perhaps he is all that, but he has not learned yet to consider very much a person for whom I believe he has a very real regard."

Her anxiety came back in a flash. "You think no accident has happened to him?"

"You heard what the hotel-keeper said. That is probably the truth. We can only wait."

"Wait and hope," she said dubiously. Then she pulled away her hand and jumped up. "Oh, it's beastly being a girl. I should like to go and look for him."

Her father remained crouched, rather bent, upon his seat, looking at her. She met his eyes and became under that glance relaxed. She possessed at that moment the pathic quality of women who wait. "Maggie," he said slowly, "I could have wished things had been otherwise." She did not answer but continued to look at him. "Many people would blame me," he said, "but I have always given you freedom of action. I have never wished to appear in the rôle of interfering parent. You are a free agent; you have always behaved as such. It is difficult to be consistent to theories of non-interference. I have been so; yet it is painful to see young people so—" he paused for the word, "inexperienced."

When she spoke her voice had a tone of appeal. "Father, admit that you like him."

"Oh yes, I like him."

"He is so honest," she repeated, "and so unpretentious."

"He is all that, but he is not the man I had hoped for."

Maggie frowned and a little wave of pain passed over her face. "I didn't think he would go away without saying good-bye or anything. . . . Something *must* have happened."

"If he were a man of our own class and of our culture, I would understand, I would know then. But with him I'm not sure. Are you?"

The girl frowned again and paused. "No, I don't quite know. Not yet, but soon I shall know."

Linton gazed at his daughter in silence and shook his head.

"Oh, yes," said Maggie, and now she smiled in assurance, "I shall understand."

IV

There came a parcel more than a week later. Maggie received it by the first post early in the morning. In a small wooden box were three bunches of desert flowers. One bunch was pink, one white, one pale yellow. All the flowers were of the same quality, small with crisp, brittle petals, somewhat like the flowers Maggie had known in England called everlastings, but these were smaller, single, more delicate. As she picked up the little, tightly-tied collections of flower-faces and smelt the faint, honey-sweet, lemon-sour scent, she knew they were from Martin, and her

heart leaped in gladness that he was well and alive. She forgot, in those seconds, the long days of her unexpressed reproach. Underneath the flowers was a letter. She heard her father approaching, and put the flowers hurriedly back into the box, afraid lest he might see; then she went to her room that she might be alone with her fast-beating heart and the letter which lay under the three bunches of desert blossoms.

It was scrawled in a childish hand, ill-written and ill-spelt. In appearance it did not present to her the character of the man that she knew. By the impression it conveyed it symbolized his unfamiliarity with the pen, that and much else; but at first sight it seemed unlike him, utterly.

"DEAR MAGGIE," he wrote, "these flowers are growing everywhere. They are mostly white that cover the ground, but I want to send you some of each. There are some yellow and pink, but not many. I feel you will like them as much as I do. I expect you wonder why I came away. It was a surprise to me too. I was coming across to South Perth on my way to the cottage and the rain was falling when I suddenly remembered what it must be like up here. I can't explain it, but I had to come along right away. I turned and walked to the station in an awful hurry to catch the morning train to Ruperttown. I had enough money in my pocket for my fare to get here, and that was all I thought about. At Ruperttown the next day, I remembered that I ought to have told you. I wrote you a note, but somehow I forgot to post it. I gave it to a fellow to post later. I expect you got it all right. . . ."

Maggie paused in her reading and shook her head.

"No, I never got it, Martin," she said. "You should have posted it yourself." How frank, how brutally frank he was. But somehow she liked him for his very faults.

She continued to read: "I am back with Mackay, not on a regular job, but putting in time at one thing and another. He pays me what he thinks fit. I told him that didn't matter for this short time, as I'm coming south again before long. I may come any time now, and thinking of you makes me want to come right away. I can't say how it is, but I don't seem to be able to be away from this country for long. I know it so well. Do you understand that, I wonder.

"Mackay is the same as ever. He's a good boss to work for. Clara, that's his wife,—I told you about her,—is just the same too. She's more discontented than usual, and ever so cross at times. She's a silly sort of woman, I think, always wants to be away in towns, can't think why I've come back, says she hates the life and bothers the old boss no end.

"Hope you can read this letter. I know it looks ever so badly written, but the flies keep buzzing so and crawling in swarms all over the paper. I'm about ten miles here from The Springs. It's fine. You'd think it wonderful, the flowers everywhere. You'd love it, I'm sure. If you write a letter, write to Quinn's Springs near Tharameka, it will get me all right.

"I shan't be long before I'm back, but can't come just yet. I hope you'll write to me. I should like to get your letter while I'm here. That would be the next best thing to seeing you."

He finished abruptly, signing his name in full.

On an odd leaf there was a postscript. "I asked about my father on the way up. No one seems to have heard anything of him. People think he's gone for good. Got done in or bushed. I wonder if he'll turn up. It's more than three years since he was seen."

Maggie re-read the letter. She mused over the lines. "I should like to get your letter while I'm here. That would be the next best thing to seeing you." She understood their import; the desert and herself were his two loves; he wanted them together, then he would know which one he loved the most. Had he not shown that already? The desert had moulded him, made him what he was, given him his confidence and his power. She dreaded this alien rival so remote from her own experience. She looked at the faint-scented, fragile flowers. If this country that he loved so much had produced these flowers, it would not be difficult for her to give it her love. His country, might it not be her country too?

Again she read the letter. This woman who was there? . . . Why did she hate the life so much? . . . The flies, were there so many? Did they crawl over everything? . . . His father, was he lost? . . . Had the desert killed him? . . . Had he disappeared finally and for ever? Martin's mother had died, his friend had been killed, his father lost, probably dead. The uncertainty of his fate struck Maggie as terrible. Was it a terrible country, terrible and beautiful? But Martin lived. He had survived by virtue of his manhood and courage. She picked up the flowers that crinkled as she touched them, and smiled. She read again the lines; "I hope

you'll write to me. I should like to get your letter while I'm here. That would be the next best thing to seeing you."

Then she sat down and wrote him a letter.

V

It was Mackay who handed him the letter. Martin tore it open at once and began to read. Mackay had dismounted and stood, his arm loosely through the reins, watching the young man.

"Not often you get a letter, Martin," he said. "Who writes to you?"

Martin did not answer till he had finished the letter. It was a long one and he read slowly. "It's from my girl," he said simply. "Boss, I want to go south again tomorrow. I told you I wouldn't be here long."

Mackay looked dubiously at the lad from his pale blue eyes. "Would you be marrying?"

"How can I without money or land? There's time enough for that. How do I know she'll have me?" He gazed meditatively across the flower-carpeted ground.

"You haven't asked her yet?"

Martin shook his head.

"Then there's no pressing hurry about the land or the money!"

"No, I shall come back and work on a long job; that is if you'll have me. You know I've saved. I shall want to buy a place of my own."

"I know you've been saving. Don't spend too much of it on wearing out the wheels of the railway carriages. . . . I'll always give you a job, Martin,

you know that. We've known each other for a long while now. . . . You mean to buy land of your own and bring your wife here?"

"Ay."

Mackay seemed as if he had not heard that short rejoinder. He remained standing motionless, looking at the ground at his feet. The horse beside him shook its head, and shivered its skin to shake off the flies. Martin, as he looked at the older man standing so mute and still, wondered why the advice, that he had steeled his mind against, did not come. At the back of his mind he had always considered Mackay a bit of a failure in spite of his tens of thousands of acres. He had expected some sort of admonition, some whine about the isolation and the failure of his own life. This silence was more disconcerting than words could have been. Perhaps Mackay was too old and too life-weary to speak. He was mentally, spiritually old, Martin considered, even if his body was still able and strong enough. Experience, perhaps, weighed too heavily upon him. In that silence and that immobility he appeared as a humble old man with eyes bent upon the earth. He was a child of the desert, grown old in its service. Truly an old child. Martin loved him for his silence, though he was troubled by it. With the generosity of youth he loved this old man of experience who would neither appraise nor betray with slanderous words, his mistress.

VI

It was late at night when Martin's train arrived at Perth station. He would have to run if he were to

catch the last ferry across the water. He knew that it would have been more reasonable to have gone to his hotel and have waited till the morning, but he could not wait. He must see Maggie that night. He reached the jetty in time to jump aboard as the boat moved out. From the landing place at South Perth he proceeded more slowly towards the cottage, neither pausing nor hurrying. The building stood dark amongst the trees, no lights were burning. At the front gate he paused a moment and whistled; there was no response. He walked to the door and knocked. All was silent. He knocked again.

"Who's there?" It was Mr. Linton's voice.

"It's me sir, it's Martin."

"Oh, you've come back have you." The words betrayed an ironic amusement under the harshness of their tone. "What do you want?"

"I've just come back from Tharameka. . . . I came . . ." he was rather at a loss.

"Is that you Martin?" He heard Maggie's voice.

"Yes, it's me all right."

The door was opened. Maggie was in her dressing gown, she held a lighted candle. The flickering light illumined her face. He saw her wide-opened, startled eyes, her smile of welcome. "Martin!" she stood opposite with the candle flame flickering between them. Then she laughed. "You are in a mess; you are simply covered in dirt."

"Yes, I came straight from the train. I hadn't time to wash."

"You got my letter?"

"Yes."

Mr. Linton appeared also in a dressing-gown. "You young scoundrel," he said. "What do you mean by turning up at this time of night?"

"I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't have come, but I had to." Then to Maggie: "I shouldn't have gone off like that I know. It never struck me how it might seem to you at this end. I did write a letter. I gave it to a fellow to post at Mt. Gerard, but you say it never got through. When I got your letter, I felt bad about it. I can't tell you how slow the train went. I wished I could have driven it. It never went fast enough, not even when it ran down the hills because the breaks wouldn't hold it. I caught the last boat. I had to come here. . . ."

Linton was unaccustomed to playing the heavy father; it was too late for him to act the part now. "So you thought you'd return as suddenly as you went," he grumbled. "I suppose you've had no food. Are you hungry?"

"Not so hungry as dirty. I'd like to wash."

"And where are you going to sleep?"

"Anywhere. I can sleep on the ground. I'm accustomed to that."

"Not after all the rain," said Maggie.

"That won't make any difference." He smiled and assured her.

"We'll give you some supper," said Linton, "though I don't think you deserve it. You better go and wash. You know where the bath is in the wood-shed. The bucket is on the winch."

Martin nodded. "I know, I'll find it. It doesn't matter about supper; I'm not hungry. I'll find somewhere to sleep. I oughtn't to keep you up, but I

wanted to know. . . ." What it was he wanted to know, he left vague. He turned quickly towards the darkness.

Maggie slipped out after him. "It's all right, Martin," she said; "father has to pretend that he's angry. He's not really, but pleased to see you back; he's quite missed you. Of course he'll have supper for you. He wouldn't let you go without, not for anything."

"It's more than I deserve," and he felt himself lifted on a wave of absurd happiness. "He's a ripping old chap, but, oh, Maggie. . . ." He felt suddenly choked by words that were all inadequate. He put out his hands to her.

She laughed. "You are so dirty, Martin, simply covered with dust and soots." She ran back into the passage. "Don't fall into the well," she called out to him.

Behind the wood-shed, Martin, stripped of his soiled clothes, poured bucket after bucket of water over himself. It was delicious this rush of dark water over his limbs. It was fresh from the earth and the flames of youth within him leapt up to meet and scatter it. He stood in a pool, his feet awash, and with his hands he rubbed his darkly-gleaming limbs. Then again, over his head, douching down his shoulders, over his back, belly and loins he poured the water. Because of the darkness of the night and the freshness of the earth he loved his body with a conscious love. He was now hungry, though but a minute ago he was quite indifferent to food. They were getting him supper; it was damned nice of old Linton. He was a damned nice old fellow. He felt

a rough, boyish love for him, would like to have clasped him with playful hands and have laughed with him, would like to have enthused him again with the powers of youth, to have lifted his years from him, and laughed away the lines from his face. Of Maggie he had then no coherent thoughts. She filled the night sky, was of the air and water touching his body. It was she that made him love all the world.

At supper he ate ravenously and told of his journey; he heard of the fortune that had come to them in his absence, for they, too, had had an adventure. Three days ago a man and his wife had walked into the shop. They were English people, very nice, and ever so appreciative. They had not only been appreciative, but they had spent thirty pounds within half an hour, and not only that; but they had given orders for a necklace and pendant. Wasn't it splendid? Maggie believed that her father was going to come into the recognition that for so long had been withheld. They were a Mr. and Mrs. Fuller and lived at West Guildford on the river. They had asked Maggie and her father to go and see them. This was a good beginning indeed, better than anything they could have expected. The story came chiefly from Maggie, but it was plain to see that Linton was also delighted at this stroke of fortune. Martin was pleased that they should be so pleased, but while he listened, that impersonal element in man's nature, which each man holds in common with all humanity, was conscious of the great adventure in which he was now involved. It was strange, stranger than anything he had imagined. This room with the lighted lamp, the white table-cloth, and Maggie sitting oppo-

site, talking and laughing. She had come from the far side of the world, and he from solitude, and the wild bush, and here they were, talking and laughing and exchanging glances. These words they spoke floated on the surface of life. This talk of the Fullers and the pendant and the necklace: it was foam and froth blown by a light wind. Underneath were profound currents, moving mysteriously. A deeper understanding was between them. Their two selves remained mute, waiting, full of expectation.

That night he slept on the verandah. Maggie spread blankets; she was concerned that there was no spare mattress in the house. Martin assured her it would make no difference, he would not notice it, he could sleep anywhere.

It was early dawn when he woke. With a throb of joy he remembered all the circumstances of his being. He stood up and looked out upon a world over which night still lingered; stars were faint in a neutral-tinted sky. The grass, vivid from the recent rains, was streaked with lines of mist. From a swamp at a little distance, in which grew paper-bark trees and she-oaks, came the continuous croaking of frogs. In irregular yet rhythmical waves their song rose and fell. It issued resonant and strong from the white folds of mist which enfolded the trunks of the trees, leaving the foliage like islands floating on a white sea. He stepped out on to the grass which was wet with dew under that cloudless sky. Over in the east he could see a pale effulgence where the sun would rise. He walked a few paces and looked back at the house. He knew that in the upper verandah Maggie was asleep. He had never felt so near to her as at

that moment; she was near to him sleeping, breathing the same cold, pure air as himself. He looked at his soiled clothes that he was wearing, and in which he had been forced to sleep, his shirt that had once been white and his blue dungarees, now varying only in their different shades of red. He felt a pang of regret that they were so dirty and travel-stained, but that could not be helped.

He picked up a pebble and pitched it on to the verandah. Then another. Maggie appeared; she stood by the wooden balustrade and looked down at him. He could see that she shivered a little in the freshness of the morning air. "Come down," he whispered. She nodded, and her lips moved in assent.

In a few minutes the door opened and she came out. He was glad that she was wearing that blue frock. He had always liked it; he had seen it appear in so vivid and pleasant a contrast to the soft tan of her skin. She hesitated in the doorway as if uncertain of herself. At that moment there was something about her which gave him an unexpected throb of pity. It seemed almost as if she were suffering in some secret way, because of her youth and beauty; perhaps too conscious of the marvellous expectancy of the dawn; because of her simplicity and innocence, because of her unrecognized desire.

He came a step forward. "Are you cold?" he said. "Let us go out away from the houses."

"Down by the water. I want to see the river in the early morning."

"Wherever you like."

She came forward and stood beside him, and there

they hesitated for a few moments as if not willing to move. The girl looked round her, taking in the unfamiliar aspect of the dawn, the wisps of mist upon the grass, the tree-tops floating so motionless above the swamp, the long rows of drops that hung upon the wires of the fence, the rows of drops which bent the grass blades and the fern fronds. Her lips were a little parted as she looked questioningly upon a world so tranced and still. Suddenly she smiled, and, sending back to its own secret home that half-revealed suffering which in woman is coeval with their soul's advancement, she turned to Martin. "I'm glad you've come back to wake me and spoil my sleep; it's worth it on a morning like this. Is every morning as beautiful? What a lot we miss. Let us go down to the river, we may see the black swans and the pelicans."

"Wherever you like," he repeated.

He took her hand, and she closed her fingers firmly upon his. Thus, holding each other's hands, they set out for the shore of the river-estuary. Soon far from the houses of South Perth they entered the early-morning fairyland of the Australian bush.

It was indeed a fairyland, for, after the rains, trees and herbs were in flower. In the grass of the undergrowth were flowering hakea and climbing sun-dews. There were "black-boys" with charred, stumpy stems and tufts of wild, green hair on top. Here and there were tall flower-spikes reaching upward like giant pokers. Casuarinas let fall as in fountains their sprays of delicate green branches. There were mimosas and many forms of acacias, paper-trees and pale, white gum-trees, wide, high-reaching sprays of

lepidospermum, blossoming in white and in red. Spiders' webs extended from branch to branch, and along each strand tiny drops of dew were caught.

"Why was it you went away so suddenly without telling us?" she asked. "Your letter didn't explain much."

"I went away to come back again, I think."

She considered this for a moment. "You were in a great hurry."

"If I'd stopped to tell you, I wouldn't have gone. I had to go at once."

This answer, though it did not seem adequate, conveyed at least a definite impression. She waited, feeling that he could not tell her more just then. In silence they walked a further distance till they were quite enfolded by the half-wild country that lies between the outskirts of South Perth and the Swan River. Perhaps the stillness of the morning made them frightened of words, but they were frightened, too, of the silence which brought nearer the moment both feared and longed for, when they would have to face each other and know whether the dream that their bodies dreamed was only partial, or whether it was complete.

And now Martin knew that he would have to speak before they reached the shore; *now* while branches arched overhead and while the undergrowth of flowers shone and gleamed in the dawn. Love's tension, which drew them together and sealed their hands, would be broken by the vista of open water and the clear expanse of the sky. He paused suddenly, his hand tightening upon hers. They turned to each other, and he met for a moment her half-frightened

and expectant glance. He looked quickly away, troubled by the waves of his own emotion which seemed to make small his heart and his courage unworthy. He was assailed again by the strange pity that hurt and plucked at the very fibres of his life. "I came back, Maggie, because I couldn't be without you or hope of you. . . . After your letter I came back because I had to know. . . ." He stammered, hesitating for words, unable to find them. He was a different Martin, indeed, from the confident lad who had told Mackay that he was going south. He looked at her now in an agony of doubt, half-freed from the limitations of his own being, yet not boldly upon the tide of love. He looked at her bent head, at the curls of hair that touched her cheek.

She lifted her head. "Oh, Martin." The words were breathed rather than spoken.

As he looked into her eyes, he forgot everything. He was free with a new freedom, no longer himself. The waves had covered him; they carried him with them; he was the crest of a wave.

Her lips were a little open, and because of her lips and the look in her eyes, he was aware of his own heart swelling and contracting in pulsations of marvellous pity. He was very humble, and afraid to come near her; not as he had imagined, masterful and bold.

Yet he approached nearer; he had both her hands in his. He kissed gently her forehead and her hair. He loosed her hands and put his arms about her. Then with a sudden, quick gesture she looked up and put her arms about his neck. The frankness of her acceptance was the sweetest thing she could have given,

and was for the moment all that their young love demanded. It was with tenderness, new and strange to himself, that Martin kissed her mouth.

The river when they reached it was covered by a layer of pale mist, but the sun was already risen, and the sky was full of light. The black swans were there as Maggie had hoped, and when they rose, frightened by the approach of human beings, they beat the air noisily with their quills. They circled twice overhead, showing their red undersides, then, soaring higher, headed inland, following the river. Maggie and Martin watched them and laughed. They held hands and walked by the edge of the water. They talked with light and happy airiness of the present and the future. For them life appeared very simple. They were very new to love, and still trod delicately and half-fearfully upon its borderland. As yet they feared passion, though feeling already in their hearts that when it followed last after all the other things, it would be perhaps the most beautiful of love's servants.

Chapter 6: *A Gift of Fortune*

I

LIFE and the prospect of life seemed gloriously simple: they loved each other; they possessed youth and confidence. As for Linton, Martin hardly considered him, though he was aware of antagonism in the elder man's silence. Linton had accepted the fact of their engagement; he had asked no questions. This reticence had troubled his daughter, for she saw him now as an old man, very lonely, not daring to speak. He was as an old man bending before the storm.

It was part of his weakness that he could not at first talk with his daughter. In the seclusion of his silence he would have to find his own consolation. He also walked through the flowering glades of the Australian spring-time, but solitary. This question of his daughter's marriage was to be the test of his philosophy. It was like a blow that he had anticipated, yet now that it fell, he found his guard down and his soul unprepared. When she was married, she would of course leave him, and would go and live a strange and alien life in some wild place in the North-West. It was a bitterness to think of her fine craftsmanship thus thrown away, for what opportunities would she have of following the trade that he had taught her so conscientiously, with such

loving discipline. She must follow her man: he did not need question that elementary fact of life. She must accept, too, the love that had come to her, and that so filled her with youth's unquestioned promise of attainment. He believed that the life-power within each man and woman was like a bow strung with a strong cord of hope. In youth an arrow was fitted, the bow was bent, bent and handled according to the quality of each soul. All the strength and the hope of the bender was behind the first skyward flight of the arrow. Let the archer follow its flight. Suppose he were to snatch the bow from his daughter's hand, should that be within his power, and the arrow should fall to the ground and the string be broken. . . . Would she find another hope, another arrow to let fly? Perhaps! But there would be a difference, that second shaft would not be aimed so daringly against the very centre of the sun.

He considered Martin. There were worse men that a girl might marry. He considered the crass ignorance of his youth. His own age and experience should have learnt tolerance to forgive that egoism, which was the inspired egoism of life itself. And then comparing his own far-away youth and the young confidence of Martin's manhood, he knew that all life travelled the same path. Let the arrow be aimed high and fearlessly, since in the end it must fall back to earth.

As for himself, he must give the young couple God speed. It was part of the painful business of declining years to learn to let go. He smiled sadly; he had let go of almost everything, and now his dearly-loved daughter would be taken away. . . . Well, he

would let go as was fitting, but not of life, not yet of life.

Thus he rallied himself. Things might have been worse. This fellow Martin O'Brien was a worker, he had his feet on the earth, was in touch with reality. He brought himself to talk with the lad.

Martin had readily admitted that he was in no position to marry. He must have a homestead of his own, and that would take years, perhaps, of work. He did not want to take Maggie up north as the wife of a wages man, to live in lodgings in some mining town; that life wasn't good enough; he must own land of his own. He told Linton how much he had saved. He could earn, at the rate paid him by Mackay, more than two hundred pounds a year. Nearly all this could be saved, as he had few expenses. He believed that he would prosper; he might if he was lucky get a manager's job on some small station with a salary of four to six hundred a year. . . . Anything was possible in the bush. He would succeed now that he had Maggie to work for. When he had homelands of his own, then they would be married, and she would come and live with him.

These simple and correct sentiments stood to his credit. Let his confidence be made good; and Linton, as he encountered his naïve yet vigorous glance envied him that time of probation, which would be so rich in hope. What would he not give to believe thus whole-heartedly in life, and to stand again upon the threshold?

In Martin his newly-won love was become part of a greater passion for life; it *was* the life-passion, intuitive and simple. It gave to existence an in-

tenser meaning, a larger relevance. For not much longer could he remain in idleness. Love itself would drive him away from love in the quest for that attainment, which intuitively he felt to be greater than the satisfaction of the senses. Now that he knew that Maggie loved him, so many things that had been difficult had become easy, or rather, they had vanished away. Love had come at the right moment, proving that it is the only power strong enough to control passion. It was hardly a question of control, for of the old struggle, the old uncertainty, the crude and hungry yearnings there was no vestige left. In a transmuted world all the old values had been transmuted. For the moment, at any rate, he was free, and in that freedom tasted an unguessed happiness. For many years, far back into his boyhood, from the time when he had seen Nance and Alec sitting together in the twilight by the dying fire, from the time when Jane had laughed at him, and when with her dark, provocative and wounding eyes she had made hot within him the mysterious ferments of sex, since then, and since earlier than that, he had been troubled. He had been wounded by the sweet yet immature initiation and by the abrupt parting from Nance, but now, strangely, all this was changed. This he felt rather than understood, but the feeling was there, strong and clear. Life was an achievement, and for that reason he might not pause in dalliance but must go back to work. Of his departure, he talked hopefully to Maggie, and of the prospects that the future held. "I shall have good luck," he said. "It goes like that with me. I've had good luck ever since

I was a boy. Not that there weren't bad chances, but I came through all right. . . . Meeting you that was the best luck of all. Wonderful good luck that I should have been there when the train came in."

Maggie smiled at what seemed to her a childishness. She could afford to be indulgent, yet was proud of him. "You must not be too confident, Martin. One never knows."

"That's it; one never knows," he repeated. "It looks as if I should have to work for years to get a place of my own, but I feel as if something will turn up before long. I'll trust in my luck."

"You're incorrigibly hopeful." She smiled a little wistfully at him.

"Shouldn't I be?"

"Yes, you'd better stay as you are made."

"You like me so, I hope."

"You're a great dear, Martin."

"You think me an awful kid?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Oh, well, never mind. . . . You see why I can't stay much longer? I must get some sort of a move on. I know I shall want to come back, but I shall stay away as long as I can manage it. . . . I'll write to you the best I can, and when I get my cheques I'll let you know. . . . We can watch together and see how the money grows and piles up at the bank. . . . Perhaps, after a bit, I might buy back Nallagoo, the place where I was a kid, what my father sold; but I don't know, I'd like something better than that for you, something more like Quinn's Springs. That's a bonza place, but too big, far too big for a start."

"Do you think I'll like it up in the bush, Martin?"

"Why, you couldn't help it. . . . It's just the finest life."

"Yes, I think I shall like it." She smiled as if inspired by a sudden confidence.

"Don't forget, you must learn to ride," he admonished her. "That's something to do while I'm away. It's all riding up there. One hardly ever walks. I'll get a good horse for you when you come up. I'll break it in myself. . . . Oh, Maggie, I wouldn't change that life for anything!"

He went on to tell her of the herds of cattle on the great upland plains, of the herds of half-wild horses, and of the sweet scents and sounds of the bush as a man cantered homeward in the evening after sundown.

As Maggie listened, her heart beat faster in response to the promise of that life so glorious, so poetic, bathed as it was in the rose-coloured sunshine of love.

II

As he travelled northward, after the train had passed Mt. Gerard, had passed Lake Harrison and its miles of gleaming salt, and was nearing Tharameka, he felt the change within himself. He was not now returning to the desert because it pulled, as earlier, with an irresistible pull of magic and mystery. He was returning because he was impelled by a latent, inward impatience; by a power which was become active *within* himself. He no longer seemed as a petitioner, humbly asking a gift. He no longer asked for sustenance from without. It was within his own self that he now looked for riches. His self-sufficiency was the kin-

dling flame of an achieved manhood, lifting him toward a climax of endeavour. This country that he had served would now become his servant.

As he sat motionless in the railway carriage, looking from steady eyes across the great plain of the Murchison Goldfield, this desert country possessed for him then more than its old mystery and charm. It revealed, as he gazed, the innermost element of his own self, some portion of personality, seemingly limitless and which was in touch with power.

III

Again weeks passed. Martin laboured at Quinn's Springs, and Maggie waited at South Perth, writing long letters and looking eagerly for dust-stained envelopes from the North-West. During this time Linton received sufficient orders for work to make him hopeful of the future. The Fullers had proved to be good friends. They frequently invited Maggie and himself to their house, introducing him to other people and praising his work. This open-hearted friendliness came at a time when it was most needed. Linton received new courage, feeling that though much might be taken, still he retained his power to work and the pride in his craft.

It was not long before Maggie received invitations to boating and tennis parties. These she enjoyed with the unspoiled zest for life that was in her. There were plenty of young people, gay picnics on the river, and riding expeditions to the Darling Ranges. Before six months were out, she received an abrupt proposal of marriage from a young man who was sub-manager of an insurance company in Perth. He was

a pleasant enough young fellow and in a good position. The proposal came as rather a shock, for she had not realized that any one should suppose that she was still free. She had told him that she was already engaged. The man had seemed surprised and almost incredulous. It had been quite difficult to make him believe that her previous engagement mattered. She told herself she must be more careful. She was enjoying this life so different from the old town-life in Birmingham; and very definitely she had enjoyed the companionship of that young man.

At the end of six months Martin returned. They had a week together. He ought not to take more than a week's holiday, he told her. Mackay hadn't wanted to spare him; there was a lot of work to be done, and now that his wages had just been raised, he ought to stick close to the job. Oh yes, things were going well, but it was a slow business . . . awfully hard to get money to start on. He had the experience, he knew all about the work, and felt sure he could run a station of his own successfully, if only he had the capital. Well, they must hope for the best, something might turn up; in the bush there was always a chance of the unexpected.

They enjoyed their week thoroughly. Maggie was keen to show the progress she had made in horsemanship. They had some long rides together, and found again very easily personal intimacy and quickness of understanding. He was pleased to see her on a horse. She had made a good start, he told her, but she trusted too much to balance. She must learn to sit down closer, must get closer into the saddle, or a horse that

bucked a bit or swerved suddenly might very well get her off. Her hands were good, and that was a great thing. He had always believed that she would have good hands with a horse.

At the end of the week, she went with him to the railway. It seemed then terribly hard that he should have to go away for so long a period. "How long will it be this time?" she asked. He couldn't tell for sure, but he didn't think he ought to come back under another six months. He must stick to the work. That was the only thing that would make their marriage possible. "You see that, don't you?"

"Yes, I see that," she answered and her eyes were moist with tears that welled up suddenly and could not be kept back.

Martin blinked his own eyes, for this business of unexpected tears was infectious. "I'll come back as soon as I can, you can be sure of that."

IV

A fortnight later Maggie received an express letter. He was coming back again at once. Would she meet him at Midland Junction. She was to get horses and they would ride the latter part of the journey together. Important things had happened. There was a great chance for them. On the ride from the junction he would tell her all about it. That was why he wanted them to ride that last bit, so that they might have a long time alone. He couldn't tell her now, not in a letter; she must wait till they could talk.

What could it mean, she wondered. She could read the thrill of his excitement in the scrawled writing.

He might have told her or given her a hint. Was his silence a little ominous? Yet she was elated at the thought of seeing him again so soon.

On the morrow when they met at the junction, she could see at the first glance that he was brimmed with the wine of success. He could not hide that cardinal fact, though he would tell her nothing till they were well away from the town and had turned their horses into the bush. Then he launched straight, as was his way, to the very heart of the affair.

"It's good and bad luck all mixed up together, Maggie. Good luck for us, bad luck for others. Rather awful in a way. One can't get over that. An awful thing happened, and it's from that, that good luck has come to me, better than I ever hoped for. I've been offered Quinn's Springs, the homestead and all. Of course on a salary. . . . It's not given to me, though it was almost in a way, chucked at me so to speak. I'm to manage it for Mackay. He's going away, and I'm to be boss. Why he should pitch on me I can't truly tell. He likes me a bit, I know, but of course that's sheer luck. It's the very place that I hoped and prayed I might get something like. It's the best place in the district. I know all the land thoroughly and all its little ways. I feel almost as if I'd half made it myself. It's more than ever I could have expected after years of work. We can be married now as soon as you will. I can't help being pleased, Maggie, though the other, that I haven't told you about yet, is pretty awful. I wish I had got the place some other way, but that was nothing to do with me, I couldn't help it. I'm sorry for Mackay, awfully sorry for him. . . ."

He would have gone on talking in vague phrases, hinting at the thing that had happened, that he shrank from naming, but the girl cut him short. "Tell me, Martin, what is it that's happened?"

He checked his horse and frowned. He seemed, thus directly challenged, to find difficulty in choosing his words. "Don't think me callous and selfish at being pleased at getting the place. I should be a hypocrite if I pretended anything else. It's just what we wanted, but I wish it had come some other way. . . . You remember what I told you about Clara, Mackay's wife, and how discontented she was . . . a queer sort of woman, never quite normal, I don't believe. . . . She killed herself, took poison."

Maggie felt as if her life had suddenly contracted and was hiding away far within her, afraid of the contact of this fact. "Killed herself, why?"

"I don't know except that she was always discontented and cantankerous. I'll tell you all I know about how it happened." But Martin, looking at the girl's white face, decided that he would tell, not all but only so much as was necessary. "This is how it happened," he began. "I was working, last Thursday, not far from the homestead, when I saw Mackay come running along moaning and making a strange noise. I called out to him, but he didn't seem to see or hear me and didn't stop, so I went after him and caught him. I found out afterwards that she had just died and that he had been with her at the last; that was why he was in such a bad way. Some of the others had been there too, trying to help, giving her oil and stuff. It was no good. He'd sat by moaning and wringing his hands, biting them too, till the blood

came, and at the end he had run away by himself."

"How had she died, Martin?" Maggie's voice was almost a whisper.

"Say, Maggie," and his voice was concerned and serious, "you mustn't take it so hard. Other people have died that way. I've seen it in the papers. Though why they should take the stuff I can't think: a beastly way of killing oneself. I suppose she took it because she didn't think. She must have been half crazed to do it. She drank Lysol, a dreadful burning stuff, a kind of disinfecting oil; they use it a lot on the stations. It burnt away her insides slowly . . . took a long time to kill her. The men who were there said it was awful. That was why Mackay was so cut up. He was all to pieces and no wonder."

These details of the disaster, came from Martin with naïve simplicity. Such were the undeniable facts concerning a life and a death, and if one lived, as he understood a man should live, one must meet them simply, with sympathy and regret, but without shuddering. For a few moments he had a vivid reminiscence of Mackay's despair; he remembered how he had blubbered piteously, and how later he had cursed the place and the first day that he had come there, had cursed himself and what he called his cold-blooded selfishness that had remained obstinate till it was too late. "No place for women," he had moaned. "I should have taken her away. She asked me often enough. I should have taken her away." Martin remembered how he had become suddenly stiff and had shuddered, and had then become limp and lain still, how he had clung to him like a child, had wetted his

face with his tears, and, at last, had let himself be led back to the house, sobbing and choking and making chuckling noises in his throat.

Martin had seen the dead woman, her burnt and blistered mouth and the red foam that flecked her dress. Of these he would not speak, neither need he tell of the scene next day when Mackay had regained part mastery of himself, when with an oath he had offered Martin the place, had flung it at him with a curse. "You may have it as well as any other," he had said. "How could I bear to stay here now?" Then, his fit of anger suddenly spent, Mackay had paused looking at him with his pale blue eyes, now blood-shot and haggard. "You have been a good friend to me, lad," he had said in a changed voice. "I don't mean any injury towards you. I offer you the place because I think you care for it, same as I do. And I care for it still. I can't help that. I've put all my best into it . . . too much, too much . . . but I couldn't stay here now. Take warning from me. Never bring a woman here, never bring a woman to the bush. You see how it ends. It's hell for them: *hell*."

All this scene and the strange intensity of Mackay's manner as he uttered those last words, came again into Martin's mind. They were the ravings of a man unhinged; he need not repeat them. Maggie looked troubled enough as it was; she was pale; her silence and the deep troubled look in her eyes made her appear different from her wont and older.

At the time he had been daunted for a few moments by that warning of Mackey's but on the follow-

ing night, as he lay thinking it over, it seemed thin and unreal. It was but the hysterical clamour of a broken man. He was not to be frightened by mere words. This life of the bush, it was a good life. How else should he live? It was not likely that he should be daunted by another man's failure and by the tragic death of a woman whom he had always thought to be of a peculiar and depressed temperament. He had considered as he lay thinking it over that it was all a matter of disposition, else why, in any and all of the branches of life, should one man fail and another succeed, and might not twenty, nay a hundred, women succeed where one had so miserably surrendered? These thoughts flashed again into his mind; they occasioned the frown upon his brow, and were the cause of his silence.

"She must have been very unhappy." Maggie's voice sounded faint and in a low key. "It's a dreadful thing to have happened. Do you think we can go there after that?"

"How can it make any difference to us? We couldn't have foreseen it or stopped it."

She rode forward for some distance without speaking. Martin watched her face, trying to understand her thoughts. When she turned to him, he recognized her old simplicity and candour, though they were changed somewhat and seemed to emerge through a quality of paleness. "No, I suppose we couldn't have helped it, but it has to do with us in a way. It seems wrong that we should profit and accept so much from what is disaster to them."

"I wish it could have come some other way," he admitted.

Again she checked her horse. She turned to her companion, and her eyes, filled with the emotional tumult of his story, met his own. "You said you believed in your luck. It's rather a dreadful kind of luck, this."

He frowned and coloured. "That's not the way to look at it," he said simply.

"No, it's not. I shouldn't have said that. Forgive me." Then impulsively she said: "Don't let us talk about it any more now."

"We've got to settle a lot of things, that's why I came back."

"Yes, I know." Then looking away into the green and blue of the southern bush, streaked and mottled as it was by sunlight and shadow, "I've looked forward so much to this ride with you, and to your coming back so soon. All this that you've told me is like a heavy cloud. . . . I've got to get used to it . . . if I can. . . . Don't talk more about it now. Later, of course, but not now."

He was puzzled by her avoidance of the thing at issue, yet he was touched by her smile of sympathy and pleading. At that moment he perceived of what different fibre and quality she was from himself. Her paleness added a strange, new beauty to her face, making her, at once, more desirable and less accessible to him. A little abashed at that sudden vision of her, he, too, looked round at the tree-stems so tranquil in the sunlight, and down at the undergrowth of flowering shrubs at their horses' feet. "Why no," he said, "let's forget all about it for the time. We've got the best of our ride in front of us still."

V

It was like a heavy cloud, that was the phrase she had used, and, on waking the following morning, that was how she had felt it to be. It remained looming on the northern horizon, and although, as the day progressed, she became more accustomed to taking the place of the dead woman, the heaviness of the cloud did not become appreciably less. On the previous night they had sat in a council of three, and the two men had most reasonably demonstrated that the occurrence was but a thing of chance, and that the indirect benefit that Martin derived was in every way justified. Their arguments convinced Maggie that the perceptions of men and women were different. Her father, and she had been surprised at this at first, was definitely of Martin's opinion. It was right, Linton had said, that Martin should accept this opportunity. That the circumstances were unfortunate, that, too, must be accepted, but let not the incidents of that misfortune be unduly magnified. Should a man's knowledge or his view be large enough, he had added, he would see that no circumstance was so isolated as to be unconnected with misfortune. For some men, perhaps for most, it was a misfortune to be born, yet not a few children were begotten and conceived with happiness and entered upon life in the midst of confidence and hope. While we were in life, we must not be too squeamish of its gifts. We must pluck the fruit though the roots might spring from the mould of sorrow.

At this exposition of philosophy, Maggie had felt suddenly inclined to laugh. Her dear father could be

rather ridiculous at times. She caught Martin's eye and they smiled to one another. "A wonderful chap, your father," Martin had said to her afterwards. "I wish I could put things half as well." And they both had laughed.

And now as on the next day she thought about it all, she saw that the cloud was a little lighter. Perhaps that element of the ridiculous in what her father had said had lightened it. Now she could see it as merely a cloud, something that with a fair wind might be blown away. She would like to forget it and think about Martin and the happiness that they brought one another. He was eager that they should be married as soon as a license could be obtained. After the marriage they were to have a short holiday, camping in the hills, and then, of course, they would travel to Quinn's Springs and would start upon their real life together.

It would be hard to leave her father. She knew how much he would miss her in spite of the brave front that he showed. She was pleased to think how much the two men were growing to like one another. It was like Martin's simple generosity to ask her father to come and live with them, assuring him that the house would be large enough and that there would be plenty of room. Her father had been so obviously pleased, but he had shaken his head in refusal. "If you make me the same proposal in a year's time I may accept," he had answered. "You must start fair and without incumbrance."

Maggie rather doubted whether he would ever come to live there, but of course he would come and stay with them. It was an exciting prospect to have a

house of her own, to be mistress of a big place, for Quinn's Springs was considered one of the finest stations on the upland plateau. For servants there would be black women, black Gins, Martin called them. He said they were ever so easy to get along with, cheerful and always ready to laugh. If you made them laugh they would work well. For them to work well, they must be, it seemed, in a good temper. And that they mostly were, so he had said. It was a wonderful adventure, having the additional relish of being so different from anything she had imagined.

If only she were free to take it all with that simple innocence for which her nature craved! But still the cloud hung there heavy and black. There would come the thought of the woman who had hated the place, and who in a fit of despair had sought so terrible a death.

Then she would argue that for that woman all the conditions had been different. She had not, at any rate, been married to Martin, Martin who knew and loved the bush so well, as she, too, would know and love it, taught by him. It was thus that she argued with herself, believing, at last, all that the confidence of youth bade her believe.

Chapter 7: *Again the Desert Horizon*

I

THEY had brought with them a tent which they set up under the great trees. But when it was pitched, they laughed at themselves for having brought it, for though inviting enough, and white and clean, they left it untenanted, preferring to sleep in the open.

On their first dawn in the bush, Martin was awake early. He rose and went wandering by himself, leaving Maggie asleep beside the tent. In the half-light when all wild things look mysterious and newly endowed with life, he descended to the stream and bathed his face and body. He sat for a short time listening to the water, and now that in a few moments the sun would be risen he returned, and on the hill-top paused, looking around him at all the world of nature which seemed at that time so adequate and in such harmony with his soul. This natural world, drenched in dew and in the scents of night, was different from the arid plains of the North-west. It had not for him the same personal attraction, but it was good enough; it sufficed. The pale blue and pink stems of the gum-trees shot up like columns, sparsely placed. In the near foreground were delicate branches, straight where they joined the stem, but bending outward to a shower of leaves and red

blossoms. Between the leaves and the branches, and limited on one side by a gigantic tree-stem, was a vista of blue distance. There was the clear outline of hills against the sky, and nearer, in the great space between, a ravine lined on each side by intermingling tree-tops. There was dew glistening upon the grass and small herbs, and in that clear air even the most distant hillside seemed accessible. All this visible land he could compass within himself. Somehow, in some miraculous way, it had become his own. The long ravine leading from the foot of the hill upon which he stood, away through the middle-distance to the far mountains, all its thousands of trees and tree-ferns, all that morning vision, and the sounds of life which struck upon his sense with so profound a joy, the distant screams of parrots and parrakeets, and the deep, low hum of mingling sounds, the stirring of lives innumerable, notes harmonious, but not yet articulate; all these, both sound and vision, were akin to his own soul: he knew and comprehended. . . . And there, close to where that great stem struck root into the earth, his young wife was sleeping. She was lying half upon her side with one arm thrown upward, partly hiding her face. A common grey blanket covered her. Her nightgown and the pillow under her head formed a little patch of gleaming white divided by the dark coil of her hair; her bare arms shone also with a separate and living whiteness.

As Martin stood looking at her, there was within his heart more than the simple pride of manhood, of the pride of possession and of passion satisfied. Her sleeping body meant all that for him and more. She had become the deep-centred significance of that

inner life from which all expression proceeds. She was the revealing symbol of the natural world, which is itself a symbol of infinity. It was she who conferred upon the whole world its airy lightness. She was the aspiration, the indivisible unity, the core of joy itself. Through her and because of her he attained to freedom; for in youth joy is spontaneous, it is strong enough to escape the limitations of desire. In youth it is possible to attain the freedom of irreflexive love.

As he looked at her, as if aware in her sleep of his presence, she moved, turned over and opened her eyes.

"Hullo, are you up already? What have you been doing?"

"Fossicking around. When I sleep out, I can't lie long. I thought I'd leave you to sleep a bit. I came back and was looking at you."

"I was dreaming of you."

He shook his head unable to find words to tell her how he, too, had been dreaming. "Aye, were you. Nice dreams, I hope."

"Not bad." She stood up. "Br——rr, it's rather chilly," she said.

"Wrap the blanket round you. Come over here for a minute. There's a view from here through the trees."

She came and stood beside him. Their hands met and were sealed together. She looked out in silence with wondering eyes over the great, wild landscape.

"Do you like it, your first morning in the bush?"

"It's more wonderful than anything I'd ever im-

agined, so wild and pure." Then after a pause she added: "It is rather terrible. It is so *wild*. . . . I'm glad I'm not alone but have got you with me." She turned to him, smiling. "It's like you, Martin, in a way, or rather you, I suppose, are like this. . . . You've been wandering about in this sort of place all your life. I understand what it is in you . . ." she paused, "that I like so much, and which sometimes frightens me."

"Was that it?"

"Partly, yes."

"It's odd you should say that. I was just thinking while I was looking at you asleep, that if you hadn't been there it wouldn't have been the same, not as it is now. . . . I should have liked it all, but in a different way." He spoke not looking at her, as though a little ashamed of his confession. "I should have been looking for something all the time. Now I don't want anything else. . . ." Then changing his tone and looking up: "Are you glad that you've come?"

"O yes, rather!"

"I'm glad you're that sort. Of course I knew you were. You know I'd rather be ever so poor and live out here in the open than be rich in a town. And the other part up north, you'll like that too," he said confidently. "Not so many trees there, and a different colour. I'm used to it, so I like it better. It's always been my home."

"I shall like it," she said simply. "Why was it we didn't go there at once rather than come here?"

"I did think of it, but this is a better place for you

for a start. One can keep clean here, and one can't keep clean up north because of the dust . . . then there are so many flies and ants. I don't think a woman would like it as much as this. There's more difficulty about getting food and water. Here all that's easy. It wouldn't be so much of a holiday, but later on, no doubt, we'll have expeditions. I shall want to show you the whole station; that will mean sleeping out more than one night. . . . Long rides in the daytime. . . . We can ride at night sometimes; it's wonderful when there is a moon."

As she looked at him trying to picture the life that he spoke of so lightly, the lines of her mouth betrayed, had he the eyes to see, a certain doubt and fear. Her glance which met his was brave enough, though her heart beat fast while she contemplated the greatness of her adventure. "I shall like it," she repeated.

II

The first ten days of their marriage which they spent in the Darling Hills was a revelation to the girl who had lived always in Birmingham. Those instincts, which in most men come into play at one time or another, and which delight in contact with life at its most primitive, found, for the first time since her childhood, their satisfaction. The Australian bush with its vast monotony and its feeling of timeless age was in its influence soothing, making it easy for her to be herself. Here where she and her man were dwarfed and appeared as tiny folk moving amongst the great trees and the unpeopled valleys, she could value more

easily than heretofore her own personality and the significance of her own body. She was able with joy and tenderness to accept the new life which love had brought to her, and the love which seemed the crown of all her life. She grew very soon to appreciate, and to guess at the meanings of natural sounds, the rustling of leaves blown by the wind, the talking of water bubbling among stones, and the notes, sudden and shrill, of unseen birds. The very vastness of the country conveyed freedom and ease. She possessed that felt, rather than reasoned, confidence, which sometimes had come to her when at night she had looked into the starry sky.

Martin did the work that there was to be done, and that was a mere nothing. He was an expert at making a fire, and so the cooking naturally fell to him. There was little washing up, for Martin shook his head at the mention of knives and forks. In the bush one eats with fingers; it was a simpler and more natural method. She laughed and agreed, but after the meal she made him wash his hands, though he would have considered a wipe on his trouser leg to have sufficed.

Thus in tranquillity and happiness the days passed, and the nights, when the cool air blew in faint gusts among the tree-stems, when the wood-embers glowed and the smoke curled upward into the sky towards the stars. Maggie would have been glad had that pleasant idleness endured longer, but toward the end of the time she felt that in Martin was growing an impatience for action. These were but days of respite. The work in the North-west was calling, and he was eager to answer that summons.

III

From the same platform where they had first met, Martin and his wife started on their journey north. After their return from the hills, they had spent two days at South Perth with Mr. Linton, but this time could not be prolonged, as Mackay had written that he was leaving Quinn's Springs and that Martin's presence was necessary at once. All Maggie's worldly possessions had been packed into the same trunks that had brought them from England, and now lay in much the same place as when Martin had first seen them. Maggie regarded them as they sat there upon the platform with that feeling of friendship for inanimate things that we sometimes possess. Now that she had said good-bye to her father, they were all that was left of her old life. They were coming with her, and she was grateful to them for that faithfulness. After that moment of private sentiment indulged in the contemplation of her luggage, she turned her face cheerfully to the future.

She felt proud of the appearance of her husband as she saw him moving amidst the crowd of people. He was wearing a white tropical suit, such as he had worn at his wedding; he looked very fair and young, very successful and confident. He came towards her smiling, lighting his pipe. "I've made it all right. . . . Given the porter half a sovereign. We shall have a carriage to ourselves as far as Ruperttown." Yes, no doubt he had made it all right. He had the look of a man who could manage these things. There was no shadow of regret in her mind for having trusted herself to his care.

Later, as the train lumbered northward over the notoriously ill-laid metals of the Midland line, she watched the changing country that they passed. In one region there were large areas of ring-barked trees, dead and gaunt, stretching their black and grey arms in nakedness to the sky as if in imprecation upon the men who had destroyed them. It seemed to Maggie a shame that the beautiful trees should be killed in this way, killed and burnt without ever the wood of the stems being put to human service. "It's to clear the land," Martin explained. "Near the railway farmers and small-holders take up all the land they can. Further out there are plenty of trees left. More trees than men by a very long way."

Once when they were passing an open tract of low scrub: "Is it at all like this up north?" she asked.

"No, quite different. Not much cultivation up there; it's cattle country. I should never care much for this clearing work," he added, "or messing about with a plough in a little plot of land. I like to feel there's plenty of room."

"Isn't there enough here?" she asked, laughing at him. "All this seems empty and wild enough."

"In its way," he admitted, "but you'll see the difference."

After the first stage of their journey of three hundred odd miles, they spent a day and a night at Ruperttown. It was here that Maggie first entered upon the fringes of the North-west. Here the streets were full of men stained red with the dust of the desert. These groups of houses and shops among the sand-dunes conveyed the feeling of some half-way house. This squalid town of corrugated

iron in which goats and donkeys wandered in the streets was a link between the more mature civilization of the South and the great spaces of the North, which lay beyond. In the evening there came through the windows of the hotel the harsh vernacular of the bush, the oaths and the blasphemies of drunken men.

"This is a beastly place," Martin remarked. "I've always hated it. . . . Neither one thing nor the other. We'll get out of it tomorrow as soon as you've rested." Then in apology for the men whose hoarse reachings and groans came from the bar. "These fellows are not so bad up in the bush. You see them at their worst here. They are wages-men or prospectors most of them. They come here after long spells of work to drink their cheques. The bar-keepers dope the stuff they give them. . . . Terrible stuff, the more you drink, the thirstier you get. It's natural they should be a bit wild."

Maggie listened, not altogether without fear, to the expression of that wildness. She was glad that she had a man to protect her. The North-west was no place for a woman to go wandering alone. So she thought then, though later on her ideas changed with her experience.

In the dining-saloon that evening, they listened to talk from the goldfields. Jim Stephens, it was said had found gold near Garloo. There were the beginnings of a rush. The Magenta claims, which soon became so famous, were beginning to be talked about. All sorts of people were pouring into the town; the trains were likely to be crowded for a while. Maggie was thrilled by the excitement in the men's voices, but Martin spoke contemptuously of gold and

mining in general. "I'll never worry about that," he said, "while there is good work to be had on a station. There is nothing to be relied on in mining . . . a toss up all the time. And yet," he added, "I suppose there must be a sort of charm in it."

"I think there must be," she said, and her eyes were shining excitement caught from the talk they had heard. "Who's Clive Kepple, they talk about? Is he so very rich?"

"So they say. I've seen him once and heard him talk. He's got no bowels of compassion for the working man, I heard him say that. He boasted that he always pays the minimum wage. Perhaps that's why he's rich." The scene at the labour exchange at Tharameka came vividly before him.

Thus, at the first contact, new impressions of a strange, fierce life crowded upon her. Yet she slept well that night in spite of the drunken shouts that sounded in the passage.

The next morning it was difficult to find seats in the train, but after recourse to bribery, which seemed the usual thing in this region, Martin told her that he had got places in the van. "Not so bad as it sounds. The best seats in the train, I think. There's no one else there. I've made that all right with the guard, so there will be plenty of room and air. . . . Far better than being crushed into a carriage with a lot of miners."

In this statement he was quite right, for travelling in the luggage van can be made very comfortable in Western Australia, more comfortable during the heat of the day, than the first-class carriages. Seated upon piles of luggage between the open doors, they

had plenty of air and a good view, as Martin had promised.

He made for her a comfortable lounge with a high back of "blueys" and kit-sacks. Here she could sit at ease, looking out through the open doors on either side. While the train was in motion there was a good through draught, far cooler than in the carriages. Soon after the train left Ruperttown it climbed slowly to the dusty steppe-land of the interior. The flowers which six weeks ago were blooming were now dried up. Here was the dusty red earth, bare and sun-stricken. Maggie gazed upon it with a child-like wonder. It was so new to her experience that she could form no judgment. It did not appear to her as beautiful, and not yet did she begin to comprehend the menace of its vast extent, of its bland and age-long innocence, nor of its utter indifference to mankind.

For hour after hour the train jerked and lumbered onward. Over the monotonous, gently-undulating land it progressed, crawling up the long, slow inclines, and hastening, with an escape of steam, into the declivities. On all sides the same landscapes of blue, feathery bushes and parched dust, and in the distance, a lilac-coloured haze circling the desert horizon.

At Mt. Gerard the train halted for half an hour. Every one turned out for drinks, and mingled with the population of the township that had gathered on the platforms to exchange news with the new-comers. Martin and his wife made their way to the refreshment room, for they too were thirsty after the long ride.

"Hullo, you here!" A man's voice hailed from the crowd.

"And you." Martin turned. He laughed, glad at the sudden meeting. "My word, some time since we met. . . . A lucky chance. This is my wife. We are on our way up north. I'm to be manager of the station where I was working."

"Good luck for you." Sherwin turned to Maggie, and she felt her hand squeezed in his hard grasp. "Your first time in this part?" he said. "Will you get the bush-hunger like the rest of us?" He turned back to Martin. "So you remembered that conversation. . . . Funny we should meet again like this."

"I don't forget."

"So now you are going north again."

"With my wife."

"I see you are one of the lucky ones."

"Yes, I think I am," and he laughed. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm caught like every one else."

Martin was not sure of his meaning. "What?"

"Gold, that's my new love. I said the desert would never go back on me, more faithful than any woman. . . . You should meet my partner, a good fellow, one of the best. He's a little cracked. He's had the gold-hunger for years, doesn't care about anything else, money's no use to him. But he knows a lot more than you or I do about the bush. He's somewhere about." He looked round carelessly, but didn't bother. "How is it you got your job?"

"The boss is giving up. His wife died."

"Oh yes, I heard about that; she took poison, didn't she?"

"Yes."

"What was the matter with her?"

"I don't know, she was always discontented."

"Stayed in one place too long. It's better to keep moving," and Sherwin dismissed the subject from his mind. "Well, so long. See you again some time. I'll look in on you if ever I'm up your way." He nodded and turned away into the crowd.

Maggie noticed that there were very few women at Mt. Gerard. This throng of eager humanity was composed almost entirely of men. She saw no other woman who seemed at all of her own kind. Many hungry eyes rested upon her, she could feel their ill-concealed greed. She was glad that she was not alone; she would keep close to Martin, believing that he was different from these others.

A little after their conversation with Sherwin, she saw him talking to a ruffianly old fellow, who looked as if he hadn't washed for years. No doubt this must be his partner, that experienced bushman whom he had described as a bit cracked. She looked at him with some interest. He was a dreadful-looking man, she thought. He had a hooked, broken nose, his eyes were blood-shot, and their lids seemed as if for months they had been preyed upon by the flies that sat unmolested, sucking at the rheumy juices. Yet he was not altogether without his appeal; in spite of these disadvantages, she could see, under the week-old growth of whiskers and beard, a face not lacking in intelligence. When he spoke his voice had a gentle, pleasant timbre, and she was attracted by the broad Irish brogue.

"I'll push in and get the drinks," Martin told her. "You stay here, I won't be long."

She stood isolated amidst that swarm of men, feel-

ing lonely and a little frightened. She hoped that Martin would not be gone long. Because it was difficult to stand there alone, feeling so many eyes upon her, she walked back towards her seat in the luggage van, hoping to find the guard with whom they had talked a good deal on the journey up. He was not there. No doubt, like every one else, he had gone for a drink. As she looked at the luggage, she felt rather like some package that had gone astray, that had drifted by mistake on to this bush-platform. But that, she told herself, was a silly thought. It was only that it was new and strange. In a little she would have a house of her own and work to do. That young fellow who had talked to Martin, he was rather a nice man, she thought . . . the same kind as Martin . . . but how callous they were toward the poor woman who had killed herself.

Martin returned with the drinks. "Sorry to have been so long . . . an awful crush." Then looking at her and understanding her mood: "Not much of a place this. . . . A crowd of gold-miners, all mad about some place called The Parrot . . . a regular boom. You'll see it's very different from this at Quinn's Springs."

Again the train progressed northward. Maggie was glad to leave behind that eager and relentless crowd of men. She looked out with relief upon the arid country, upon the shimmering, encrusted surface of Lake Harrison. She was touched by its strange beauty, though wondering at the great surface, neither water nor land, and seemingly devoid of life. Throughout the day, the sun blazed upon the train. Whenever it stopped, which it did frequently, the

confined space within the carriages became scorchingly hot, yet because of the high altitude, the fine dryness of the air, Maggie was braced to meet the present and the future confidently, feeling the currents of life very strong and exultant.

At Tharameka there was the same crowd of dust-stained men. Mackay was on the platform: a queer, little old man, she thought. He hardly seemed to take any notice of her presence, but took Martin aside and walked with him in conversation at a little distance.

She was tired after the long journey, so they spent the night at Tharameka, as it was too late to drive that evening to the station. The hotel was far more primitive than had been the hotel at Ruperttown, yet in spite of its sordidness, there was something, even at Tharameka, to which her heart responded. There was vitality in the very air: a brutal, masculine vitality, but, like life itself, attractive. "One has to rough it a bit in a place like this," Martin had said. She had smiled and loved him for his terseness.

The next morning, the discomforts of the journey were forgotten. She awoke keen and hungry for the new life. After an early breakfast, they started for Quinn's Springs. She and Martin were alone in the buggy. The luggage would follow later in a cart. "A thirty-five mile drive," Martin told her. "You'll see something of the bush now. This is better than bumping along in a train, don't you think?"

In a short while they were free of the town and the outskirts of the town. The beaten trackway of red dust led in undulations over the granite and the broad dykes of schist. Martin pointed out land-

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marks, places that had for him associations. To Maggie the country all seemed very much the same. It was wild and empty, yet it was beautiful. She was elated by the sight of the great plain. This drive towards her new home, in the freshness of the morning, seemed to her delicious. The air was fine and pure, it was like wine.

"I can't help being sorry for old Mackay," Martin said, apropos of nothing in particular. "He really loves the place. You should have heard him talk about it. It's hard for him giving it up to another."

"Yes."

"He's gone to pieces . . . almost like a child."

"What's going to happen to him? Where is he going to?"

"He has some kind of a relative, lives in a little farm somewhere north of Perth. He's going there. Of course he's a rich man; he can do as he likes. Quinn's Springs is worth a lot, it brings in a big income." After a pause he added: "He'll pick up new interests, no reason why he shouldn't."

"I wish she hadn't killed herself like that."

Martin frowned. "Don't think about it. It's nothing to do with us. It would have been just the same anywhere else. She was the discontented sort, a strange, odd woman."

"You think it would?"

"Yes, indeed I do. Don't worry about it, Maggie. It's silly to worry about things that can't be helped."

"Yes, it's silly to think about it. I'm glad to be here, Martin, now we are out of that horrid little town."

When they left the main track and Martin turned,

for a short cut, into the bush where they wound their way among the mulga scrub, Maggie laughed with excitement. It was fun driving over fallen stems, hearing them crunch under the wheels. This was the real North-west at last.

Martin drove to the summit of a little hill that overlooked Quinn's Springs. He drew rein and they looked down upon the homestead. It looked very charming and inviting, a big house with deep verandahs. The creeping Bougainvillaeas and passion-flowers were in blossom. There was a wealth of green in the enclosure. As Mackay had said, it formed a green oasis in the midst of the grey-blue vegetation of the plain.

"Do you like the look of it?"

"It's beautiful, a lovely place."

"Ay, and look round. All you can see, and miles beyond that . . . all belongs. A fine station."

Maggie's eyes that had been fixed upon the house, now shifted to the desert horizon. The country in gently undulating, monotonous waves stretched far away into the lilac distance. Over all those miles of country she saw no distinguishing feature; everywhere it seemed the same.

Her heart felt as if it had been squeezed slightly. Her eyes filled with tears, but whether of joy or pain, she could not have told. She did not speak, and Martin, who had failed to notice her emotion, shook the reins. The horse trotted down the slope towards the homestead.

AUTHOR'S POSTSCRIPT

If when turning the last page the reader complains that this is but the beginning of a story, I will admit so obvious a truth, and will only say in my defence that I deal with human history which is continuous. What I have shown is a phase. With each phase of life there is a separate metamorphosis of the spirit; with every fundamental experience the state of the soul changes.

The desert horizon has rounded, in this story, a life passing from boyhood to youth, from youth to manhood. The phases here depicted merge and blend; they are fundamentally of a like character. Martin, enslaved, the willing slave of life and of the desert, is as yet hardly aware of his captivity. He sees only the lilac distance of the horizon; he has not touched the walls of his prison. Hope and love here find space enough to grow; they reach indeed a climax untouched by humility. So much for the first phase, it forms a story separate and complete.





